Two Worlds and In Between:

The Best of Caitlín R. Kiernan

(Volume One)

Caitlín R. Kiernan

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For Aunt Beast

In memory of Elizabeth Tilman Aldridge

(1970 – 1995)

“Tell on,” quoth the King, who chanced to be sleepless and restless, and therefore was pleased by the prospect of hearing her story. So Shahrazad rejoiced; and thus, on the first night of a Thousand Nights and a Night, she began with the…”

Alf Laylah Wa Laylahí,
translated by Sir Richard Francis Burton (1884)

A long train held up by page on page.
A hard reign held up by rage.
Once a railroad,
Now it’s done…

Sisters of Mercy,
“Lucretia, My Reflection” (1987)

INTRODUCTION

This is the second introduction I'll have written for this collection. I wrote the first in October, and here in February, I've thrown it away. It spent too much time prattling on about *what's* in this book, and hardly any time at all talking about what this book *means* to me, which is, so far as I'm concerned, what it *means*. And it means snapshots, because that's what all stories I write come down to; each is a snapshot of who I was during however many days and weeks it was written. A fitional reflection of my mind fossilized, set in paper and ink, instead of stone. Memorialized, for better or worse. This is who I was, and this, and this, and that, and most times I look back and wince. I'm rarely kind to who I was. But other times, looking back is bittersweet. Sometimes, I'm even grateful to the me of then who left a snapshot for the me of now. Maybe I should let go and join those who pretend the past is past, but it's a falsehood I've never learned to spin. Eliot wrote:

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.
"Burnt Norton" (1935 – 1936)

And, in *A Long Day's Journey Into Night*, Mary says, "The past is the present, isn't it? It's the future too. We all try to lie out of that but life won't let us."

This I understand.

I wasn't always a storyteller. I was something else and someone else before, and then there were a number of years as surely amounting to apocalypse as any seven shattered seals or blaring trumpets, a tumult of private war and famine, earthquakes and locusts and poisoned rivers. Becoming a storyteller was a necessary reinvention of myself from the ashes of who I was and who I might have been. In the aftermath, it's what was left to me, and somehow, somewhy, I decided it was better than lying down and dying. One age ended and the next began, and in the new age I was a storyteller. I laid out plots, characters, and adjectives against the ruin,

and moved on. And now I've traveled to the future. We are all time travelers until the day we die. From this vantage, I survey the tales I've told, and I wince and I smile and I wonder at all the other ways it might have gone if I'd been unable to tell my tales. Or if I'd written them, but no one had ever listened. I wouldn't be here and now. I would be some other me – some other me – some other when and where, instead – if I were anywhere at all.

Retrospective is a hazardous affair, which seems fairly fucking obvious. Sorting through the faded Polaroids and contact sheets and negatives, letting them stab at me all over again, picking scabs I thought were scars. Wanting to be kind to them, but sneering and snarling and regretting I couldn't have been who I am now when I was busy being who I was then so that I could reach now. How easy it is to suppose posthumous is merciful, and I'd be luckier had this task fallen to another, very many years from the now that isn't yet the now to come.

You'll turn the pages and read stories of distant planets, of secrets and parallel worlds glimpsed at perilously high prices, passion plays amid industrial decay, the aliens we are, fancies of would-be hells and heavens and purgatories, nightmares turned inside out only to be turned right ways round again. You'll see angels imprisoned behind steel bars, fairies on city sidewalks and in filthy backrooms, lost children, adults no one will ever find, cannibals, ghouls, penny-dreadful plagues and dimestore vampires, futures as bright as I could scry.

But when I turn the pages, that's not what *I* see.

I see the procession of me.

At the start, there are long nights in squalid Southern bars that once might have been bowling alleys or gas stations before they fell to secretive battalions of queers and addicts. Birmingham. Pills and drag, my face so, so impossibly young and watching from dressing-room mirrors, taking for granted that life will be short and ugly, so live hard, live fast, fuck carelessly, remain drunken, steadfastly self-destructive and gentle with the lovers for whom these prescriptions and prophecies would prove fatal before the fullness of their teens and twenties were spent. Vodka and Vicodin. Here's a night in the company of the pretty man who shot heroin into my arm, and held me while I puked. Here's the day I splintered a bed frame with a claw hammer. Here, I wrap myself tight around you, neither of

us knowing you'd take your life just five years farther on. The salvation of smoky dance floors and music so loud it almost stopped my heart.

The procession, the parade.

I trade one city for another, Birmingham for Athens, a transition right here in black and white. I could have gone down, almost did, embracing what I took to be my shitty finest hour; no one's more surprised than me to learn I'm too angry to drown. Sour memories and premature death have set me afire. Sure, I didn't survive in one piece, but I survived all the same. I got away, when too many others didn't. And in this next new age of me if I'm not typing, I'm in coffeehouses, tattoo parlors, bars that serve drinks in glasses instead of plastic cups. I pick up a microphone and scribble lyrics and sing on stages. I batter myself bloody against the bulwark of new lovers with whom I've nothing in common excepting desperation and despite, and that never ends well. The months all reek of vanilla, PBR, magnolia blossoms, cassette tapes, hot coffee, sweat, cigarettes, sex, black-eyed peas, marijuana, comic books, hot parking lots at midnight, band members who can't be bothered to bathe, bad teeth, the tiny room where I write. I smear my eyes with black and paint my face white, having traded the role of Death's concubine for the role of Death's howling jester. I type, and scream, and wake up in unfamiliar places. Friends pierce my flesh with sterile, autoclaved needles, and I wear a face-full of stainless-steel fuck you.

I type. Mostly, I type.

But this age has an expiration date, like every other before and every yet to come, so I'm hauled squinting out of the sticky, tear- and beer-stained shadows by other typists, book-bound heroes I didn't dare imagine would ever pause to give me the time of day. And to a man, to a woman, they tell me to keep typing and maybe this reforged storyteller me will go places. She does. I walk the streets of London, Los Angeles, Dublin, Manhattan, New Orleans, San Francisco, Seattle, always coming home. I see my name on the cover of a book for the first time, and am only slightly ashamed for wanting to rub it in the face of everyone who ever told me how far I'd never go, that I was nothing but the sum total of their failures and my own shortcomings. For a time, these little victories even prove a halfway decent antidote for the self-loathing and addiction and insanity, real and metaphorical. Still, I can't ever pretend it wouldn't have meant infinitely more, if my dead were my living and here with me. And I keep typing.

That's not all, of course. There's a decade more that I won't belabor here. I only wanted to say this is what I see whenever I look at this collection's Table of Contents. The procession, the parade. Because the past is the present, isn't it? And I keep it safe in story-shaped boxes.

Excerpt from the first introduction (because I never *really* throw anything away; I've kept every ticket stub from every movie I've seen since 1994, no fooling):

I once had a creative-writing instructor – an oxymoron if ever there were one – who chastised me repeatedly for writing "oblique" fiction. He also chastised me for being lyrical, and for writing colorful prose. For having a *voice,* which I allowed to color, and sometimes obscure, the clarity of my prose. He seemed to cherish clarity above all else, as though fiction might be no more than a sermon, or a monograph on barnacles, or a shopping list. He was fond of quoting George Orwell, who once wrote, "… and yet it is also true that one can write nothing readable unless one constantly struggles to efface one's own personality. Good prose is like a windowpane." [1] Now, I'm very fond of Orwell, and I'm well enough aware this passage is sacred to writing instructors everywhere and to those who preach the doctrine that, above all else, fiction must be bland and forthright and readily accessible. But I take issue with this, believing as I do that an author must never, ever "efface one's own personality" from her prose. Indeed, to do such a thing is entirely antithetical to good prose. Our fictions, if they are sincere and authentic, must be all but indistinguishable from our personalities. They must be the distillation of our essences, the world seen through our eyes. If I believed in the soul, I would say good prose must be no less than the purest expression of our souls. Therefore, I will be so arrogant as to amend Orwell's famous and tiresomely quoted statement. Yes, good prose *is* a window. He got that part right, in that it allows us to look out upon the world and into other minds. But good prose is a *stained-glass* window, and the pigment in the glass becomes the voice of the author.

So, here are my windows, stained all with me. It's impossible to say whether they truly are the best windows I've ever made, but I have loved creating each and every one, in turn. Have a look.

Caitlín R. Kiernan
February 4, 2011

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1 “Why I write,” George Orwell, June 1946, originally published in the final issue of Gangrel (Summer 1946). [back]

PART ONE

1993 – 1999

Emptiness Spoke Eloquent

Lucy has been at the window again, her sharp nails tap-tapping on the glass, scratching out there in the rain like an animal begging to be let in. Poor Lucy, alone in the storm. Mina reaches to ring for the nurse, stops halfway, forcing herself to believe that all she's hearing is the rasping limbs of the crape myrtle, whipped by the wind, winter-bare twigs scritching like fingernails on the rain-slick glass. She forces her hand back down onto the warm blanket. And she knows well enough that this simple action says so much. Retreat, pulling back from the cold risks; windows kept shut against night and chill and the thunder.

Back then, there was so much of windows.

On the color television bolted high to the wall, tanks and soldiers in the Asian jungle and that bastard Nixon, soundless.

Electric-white flash and almost at once, a thunderclap that rattles the sky and sends a shudder through the concrete and steel skeleton of the hospital and the windows and old Mina, in her safe and warm blanket.

Old Mina.

She keeps her eyes open, avoiding sleep, and memories of other storms.

And Lucy at her window.

Again she considers the nurse, that pale angel to bring pills to grant her mercy, blackness and nothingness, the dreamless space between hurtful wakings. Oh, if dear Dr. Jack, with his pitiful morphine, his chloral and laudanums, could see the marvels that men have devised to unleash numbness, the flat calm of mind and body and soul. And she *is* reaching then, for the call button and for Jonathan's hand, that he should call Seward, anything against the dreams and the scritching at the window.

This time she won't look, eyes safe on the evening news, and the buzzer makes no sound in her room. This time she'll wait for the soft and rubber-quiet footsteps, the door to open and Andrea or Neufield or whoever is on duty to bring oblivion in a tiny paper cup.

But after a minute, a minute and a half, and no response, Mina turns her head, giving in by turtle-slow degrees, and she watches the rain streaking the dark glass, the restless shadows of the crape myrtle.

June 1904

The survivors of the Company of Light stood in the rubble at the base of the castle on the Arges and looked past iron and vines, at the empty, soulless casements. It seemed very little changed, framed now in the green froth of the Carpathian summer instead of snow, ice, and bare grey stone.

The trip had been Jonathan's idea, had become an obsession, despite Mina's protests and Arthur's, too, and in the end, seeing how much the journey would cost her, even Van Helsing's. Jack Seward, whose moods had grown increasingly black since their steamer had docked in Varna, had refused to enter the castle grounds and stood alone outside the gates. Mina held little Quincey's hand perhaps too tightly and stared silently up at the moss-chewed battlements.

There was a storm building in the east, over the mountains. Thunder rumbled like far-off cannon, and the warm air smelled of rain and ozone and the heavy purplish blooms hanging from the creepers. Mina closed her eyes and listened, or *tried* to listen the way she had that November day years before. Quincey squirmed, restless six, by her side. The gurgle and splash of the swollen river, rushing unseen below them, and the raucous calls of birds, birds she didn't recognize. But nothing else.

And Van Helsing arguing with Jonathan.

"…now, Jonathan, now you are satisfied?"

"Shut up. Just shut the bloody hell up."

What are you listening for, Mina?

Lord Godalming lit his pipe, some Turkish blend, exotic spice and smoke, sulfur from his match. He broke into the argument, something about the approaching storm, about turning back.

What do you expect you'll hear?

The thunder answered her, much closer this time, and a sudden, cold gust blown before the storm.

He's not here, Mina. He's not here.

Off in the mountains, drifting down through passes and trees, a wild animal cried out, just once, in pain or fear or maybe anger. And Mina opened her eyes, blinked, waiting for the cry to come again, but then the thunder cracked like green wood overhead and the first drops of rain, fat and cold, began to fall. The Professor took her arm, leading her away, mumbling Dutch under his breath, and they left Jonathan standing there,

staring blankly up at the castle ruins. Lord Godalming waited, helpless, at his side.

And in the falling rain, her tears lost themselves, and no one saw them.

November 1919

Fleeing garish victory, Mina had come back to Whitby hardly two weeks after the armistice. Weary homecomings for the living and maimed and flag-draped caskets. She'd left Quincey behind to settle up his father's affairs.

From the train, the lorry from the station, her bags carried off to a room she hadn't seen yet; she would not sleep at the Westenra house at the Crescent, although it was among the portion of the Godalming estate left to her after Arthur Holmwood's death. She took her tea in the inn's tiny dining room, sitting before the bay windows. From there she could see down the valley, past red roofs and whitewash to the harbor pilings and the sea. The water glittered, sullen under the low sky. She shivered and pulled her coat tighter, sipped at the Earl Grey and lemon in the cracked china, the cup glazed as dark as the brooding sky. And if she looked back the other way, towards East Cliff, she might glimpse the ruined abbey, the parish church, and the old graveyard.

Mina refilled her cup from the mismatched teapot on the table, stirred at the peat-colored water, watching the bits of lemon pulp swirl in the little maelstrom she'd made.

She'd go to the graveyard later, maybe tomorrow.

And again the fact, the cold candor of her situation, washed over and through her; she had begun to feel like a lump of gravel polished smooth by a brook. That they were all dead now, the Company, and she'd not attended even a single funeral. Arthur first, almost four years back now, and then Jack Seward, lost at Suvla Bay. The news about Jonathan hadn't reached her until two days after the drunken cacophony of victory had erupted in Trafalgar Square and had finally seemed to engulf the whole of London. He'd died in some unnamed village along the Belgian border, a little east of Valenciennes, a senseless German ambush only hours before the cease-fire.

She laid her spoon aside, and watched the spreading stain it made on her napkin. The sky was ugly, bruised.

A man named MacDonnell, a grey-bearded Scotsman, had come to her house, bearing Jonathan's personal things – his pipe, the brass-framed

daguerreotype of her, an unfinished letter. The silver crucifix he'd worn like a scar the last twenty years. The man had tried to comfort her, offering half-heard reassurances that her husband had been as fine a corporal as any on the Front. She thought, sometimes, that she might have been more grateful to him for his trouble.

She still had the unfinished letter carried with her from London, and she might look at it again later, though she knew it almost by heart now. Scribblings she could hardly recognize as his, mad and rambling words about something bestial trailing his battalion through the fields and muddy trenches.

Mina sipped her tea, barely noticing that it had gone cold, and watched the clouds outside as they swept in from the sea and rushed across the rocky headland.

A soupy fog in the morning, misty ghosts of ships and men torn apart on the reef, and Mina Harker followed the curve of stairs up from the town, past the ruined Abbey, and into the old East Cliff churchyard. It seemed that even more of the tombstones had tumbled over, and she remembered the old sailors and fishermen and whalers that had come here before, Mr. Swales and the others, and wondered if anyone ever came here now. She found a bench and sat, looking back down to where Whitby lay hidden from view. The yellow lantern eyes of the lighthouses winked in the distance, bookending the invisible town below.

She unfolded Jonathan's letter and the chilling breeze fingered the edges of the paper.

The foghorns sounded, that throaty bellow, perplexed and lonesome.

Before leaving London, she'd taken all the papers, the typed pages and old notebooks, the impossible testament of the Company, from the wall safe where Jonathan had kept them. Now they were tucked carefully inside the brocade canvas satchel resting on the sandy cobbles at her feet.

"*…and burn them, Mina, burn every trace of what we have seen,*" scrawled in that handwriting that was Jonathan's, and no one's she'd ever met.

And so she had sat at the hearth, these records in her lap, watching the flames, feeling the heat on her face. Had lifted a letter to Lucy from the stack, held the envelope a moment, teasing the fire as a child might tease a cat with table scraps.

“No,” whispered, closing her eyes against the hungry orange glow and putting the letter back with the rest. *All I have left, and I’m not that strong.*

Far out at sea, she thought she heard bells, and down near Tate Hill Pier, a dog barking. But the fog made a game of sound, and she couldn’t be sure she’d heard anything but the surf and her own breathing. Mina lifted the satchel and set it on the bench beside her.

Earlier that morning she’d stood before the looking glass in her room at the inn, staring into the soft eyes of a young woman, not someone who had seen almost forty-two years and the horrors of her twentieth. As she had so often done when standing before her own mirrors, she’d looked for the age that should have begun to crease and ruin her face and found only the faintest crow’s feet.

“*…every trace, Mina, if we are ever to be truly free of this terrible damnation.*”

She opened the satchel and laid Jonathan’s letter inside, pressed it between the pages of his old diary, then snapped the clasp shut again. *Now,* she thought, filled suddenly with the old anger, black and acid. *I might fling it into the sea, lose these memories here, where it all started.*

Instead, she hugged the bag tightly to her and watched the lighthouses as the day began to burn the mist away.

Before dusk, the high clouds had stacked themselves out beyond Kettleness, filling the eastern sky with thunderheads, bruise-black underbellies already dumping sheets of rain on a foamy white sea. Before midnight, the storm had reared above Whitby Harbor and made landfall. In her narrow room above the kitchen, framed in wood and plaster and faded gingham wallpaper haunted by a hundred thousand boiled cabbages, Mina dreamed.

She was sitting at the small window, shutters thrown back, watching the storm walk the streets, feeling the icy salt spray and rain on her face. Jonathan’s gold pocket watch lay open on the writing desk, ticking loud above the crash and boom outside. MacDonnell had not brought the watch back from Belgium, and she’d not asked him about it.

Regardless, there it lay, ticking. Quick and palsied fingers of lightning forked above the rooftops and washed the world in an instant of daylight.

On the bed behind her, Lucy said something about Churchill and the cold wind, and she laughed. Chandelier diamond tinkling and asylum

snigger between velvet and gossamer and rust-scabbed iron bars.

And still laughing, she says, “Bitch…apostate, Wilhelmina coward.”

Mina looked down, watching the hands, hour, minute, second, racing themselves around the dial. The fob was twisted and crusted with something unpleasantly dark.

“Lucy, please…” and her voice came from very far away, and it sounded like a child asking to be allowed up past her bedtime.

Groan and bedspring creak, linen rustle and a sound even wetter than the pounding rain. Lucy Westenra’s footsteps moved across the bare floor, heels clocking, ticking off the shortening distance.

Mina looked back down, and Drawbridge Road was absurdly crowded with bleating sheep, soppy wool in the downpour. The gangling shepherd was a scarecrow blown from the wheat fields west of Whitby. Twiggy fingers emerged from beneath his burlap sleeves, as he drove his flock towards the Harbor.

Lucy was standing very close now. Stronger than the rain and the old cabbage stink, anger that smelled like blood, and garlic bulbs, and dust. Mina watched the sheep and the storm.

“Turn *around*, Mina. Turn around and look at me and tell me that you even loved Jonathan.”

Turn around Mina and tell

“Please, Lucy, don’t leave me here.”

and tell me that you even loved

The sheep were turning, their short necks craning upwards, and they all had red little rat eyes, and then the scarecrow howled.

Lucy’s hands were cool silk on Mina’s fevered shoulders.

“Don’t leave, not yet…”

Lucy’s fingers, hairless spider legs, had crawled around her cheeks and seized her jaw. Something brittle dry, something crackling papery against her teeth, was forced past her lips.

On the street, the sheep were coming apart in the storm, reduced to yellowed fleece and fat-marbled mutton; a river of crimson sluicing between paving stones. Grinning skulls and polished white ribs, and the scarecrow had turned away and broken up in the gale.

Lucy’s fingers pushed the first clove of garlic over Mina’s tongue, then shoved another into her mouth.

And she felt cold steel at her throat.

we loved you, Mina, loved as much as the blood and the night and even as much as

Mina Harker woke up in the hollow space between lightning and a thunderclap.

Until dawn, when the storm tapered to gentle drizzle and distant echoes, she sat alone on the edge of the bed, shaking uncontrollably, and tasting bile and remembered garlic.

January 1922

Mina held the soup to the Professor's lips, chicken steam curling in the cold air. Abraham Van Helsing, eighty-seven and so much more dead than alive, tried to accept a little of the thin broth. He took a clumsy sip, and the soup spilled from his mouth, dribbling down his chin into his beard. Mina wiped his lips with the stained napkin lying across her lap.

He closed his grey-lashed eyes and she set the bowl aside. Outside, the snow was falling again, and the wind yowled wolf noises around the corners of his old house. She shivered, tried to listen instead to the warm crackle from the fireplace, the Professor's labored breath. In a moment, he was coughing again, and she was helping him sit up, holding his handkerchief.

"Tonight, Madam Mina, tonight…" and he smiled, wan smile, and trailed off, his words collapsing into another coughing fit, the wet consumptive rattle. When it passed, she eased him back into the pillows, and noticed a little more blood on the ruined handkerchief.

Yes, she thought, *perhaps.*

Once she would have tried to assure him that he would live to see spring and his damned tulips and another spring after that, but she only wiped the sweaty strands of hair from his forehead, and pulled the moth-gnawed quilt back around his bony shoulders.

Because there was no one else and nothing to keep her in England, she'd made the crossing to Amsterdam the week before Christmas; Quincey had been taken away by the influenza epidemic after the war. So, just Mina now, and this daft old bastard. Soon enough, there would be only her.

"Shall I read for a bit, Professor?" They were almost halfway through Mr. Conrad's *The Arrow of Gold*. She was reaching for the book on the nightstand (and saw that she'd set the soup bowl on it) when his hand, dry and hot, closed softly around her wrist.

“Madam Mina,” and already he was releasing her, his parchment touch withdrawn and there was something in his eyes now besides cataracts and the glassy fever flatness. His breath wheezed in, then forced itself harshly out.

“I am *afraid*,” he said, his voice barely a rasping whisper, slipped into and between the weave of the night.

“You should rest now, Professor,” she told him, wishing against anything he might say.

“So much a fraud I was, Madam Mina.”

did you ever even love

“It was *my* hand that sent her, by my *hand*.”

“Please, Professor, let me call for a priest. I cannot…”

The glare that flashed behind his eyes – something wild and bitter, vicious humor – made her look away, scissoring her fraying resolve.

“Ah,” and “Yes,” and something strangled that might have been laughter. “So, I confess my guilt? So, I scrub the blood from my hands with that other blood?”

The wind banged and clattered at the shuttered windows, looking for a way inside. For a moment, an empty space filled with mantel-clock ticking and the wind and his ragged breathing, there was nothing more.

Then he said, “Please, Madam Mina, I am thirsty.”

She reached for the pitcher and the chipped drinking glass.

“Forgive me, sweet Mina.”

The glass was spotty, and she wiped roughly at its rim with her blue skirt.

“…had it been hers to choose…” and he coughed again, once, a harsh and broken sound. Mina wiped at the glass harder.

Abraham Van Helsing sighed gently, and she was alone.

When she was done, Mina carefully returned the glass to the table with the crystal pitcher, the unfinished book, and the cold soup. When she turned to the bed, she caught her reflection in the tall dressing mirror across the room; the woman staring back could easily have passed for a young thirty. Only her eyes, hollow, hollow, bottomless things, betrayed her.

May 1930

As twilight faded from the narrow rue de l’Odéon, Mina Murray sipped her glass of chardonnay and roamed the busy shelves of Shakespeare and

Company. The reading would begin soon, some passages from Colette's new novel. Mina's fingers absently traced the spines of the assembled works of Hemingway and Glenway Wescott and D. H. Lawrence, titles and authors gold or crimson or flat-black pressed into cloth. Someone she half-recognized from a café, or a party, or some other reading passed close, whispered a greeting, and she smiled in response, then went back to the books.

And then Mlle. Beach was asking everyone to please take their seats, a few straight-backed chairs scattered among the shelves and bins. Mina found a place close to the door, and watched as the others took their time, quietly talking among themselves, laughing at unheard jokes. Most of them she knew by sight, a few by name and casual conversation, one or two by reputation only. Messieurs Pound and Joyce, and Radclyffe Hall in her tailored English suit and sapphire cufflinks. There was an unruly handful of minor Surrealists she recognized from the rue Jacob bistro where she often took her evening meals. And at first unnoticed, a tallish young woman, unaccompanied, choosing a chair off to one side.

Mina's hands trembled, and she spilled a few drops of the wine on her blouse.

The woman sat down, turning her back to Mina. Beneath the yellowish glow of the bookstore's lamps, the woman's long hair blazed red-gold. The murmuring pack of Surrealists seated themselves in the crooked row directly in front of Mina, and she quickly looked away. Sudden sweat and her mouth dry, a dull undercurrent of nausea, and she hastily, clumsily, set her wine glass on the floor.

That name, held so long at bay, spoken in a voice she thought she'd forgotten.

Lucy.

Mina's heart, an arrhythmic drum, raced inside her chest like a frightened child's.

Sylvia Beach was speaking again, gently hushing the murmuring crowd, introducing Colette. There was measured applause as the authoress stepped forward, and something sarcastic mumbled by one of the Surrealists. Mina closed her eyes tightly, cold and breathing much too fast, sweaty fingers gripping the edges of her chair.

Someone touched her arm, and she jumped, almost cried out, gasping loud enough to draw attention.

“Mademoiselle Murray, *êtes vous bien*?”

She blinked, dazed, recognizing the boy’s unshaven face as one of the shop’s clerks, but unable to negotiate his name.

“*Oui, je vais bien.*” And she tried to smile, blinking back sucking vertigo and dismay. “*Merci…je suis désolé.*”

He nodded, doubtful, reluctantly returning to his windowsill behind her.

At the front of the gathering, Colette had begun to read, softly relinquishing her words. Mina glanced to where the red-haired woman had sat down, half expecting to find the chair empty, or occupied by someone else entirely. She whispered a faithless prayer that she’d merely hallucinated or suffered some trick of light and shadow. But the woman was still there, though turned slightly in her seat, so that Mina could now see her profile, her full lips and familiar cheekbones.

The smallest sound, a bated moan, from Mina’s pale lips, and she saw an image of herself rising, pushing past bodies and through the bookstore’s doors, fleeing headlong through the dark Paris streets to her tiny flat on Saint-Germain.

Instead, Mina Murray sat perfectly still, watching, in turn, the reader’s restless lips and the delicate features of the nameless red-haired woman wearing Lucy Westenra’s face.

After the reading, as the others milled and mingled, spinning respectful pretensions about *Sido* (and Madame Collete in general), Mina inched towards the door. The crowd seemed to have doubled during the half-hour, and she squeezed, abruptly claustrophobic, between shoulders and cigarette smoke. But four or five of the rue Jacob Surrealists were planted solidly and typically confrontational, in the shop’s doorway, muttering loudly among themselves, the novelist already forgotten in their own banter.

“*Pardon,*” she said, speaking just loudly enough to be heard above their conversation, “*puis-je…*” Mina pointed past the men to the door.

The one closest, gaunt and unwashed, almost pale enough to pass for albino, turned towards her. Mina remembered his face, its crooked nose. She’d once seen him spit at a nun outside the Deux Magots. He gave no sign that he intended to let her pass, and she thought that even his eyes looked unclean.

Carrion eyes, she thought.

“Mademoiselle Murray, please, one moment.”

Mina matched the man’s glare a second longer, and then, slowly, turned, recognizing Adrienne Monnier; her own shop, the Maison des Amis des Livres, stood, dark-windowed tonight, across the street. It was generally acknowledged that Mlle. Monnier shared considerable responsibility for the success of Shakespeare and Company.

“I have here someone who would very much like to meet you.” The red-haired woman was standing at her side, sipping dark wine. She smiled, and Mina saw that she had hazel-green eyes.

“This is Mademoiselle Carmicheal from New York. She says that she is a great admirer of your work, Mina. I was just telling her that you’ve recently placed another story with the *Little Review*.”

“*Anna* Carmicheal,” the woman said, eager and silken-voiced, offering Mina her hand. Detached, drifting, Mina watched herself accept it.

Anna Carmicheal, from New York. Not Lucy.

“Thank you,” Mina said, her voice the same dead calm as the sea before a squall.

“Oh, Christ, no, thank *you*, Miss Murray.”

And Mina noticed how much taller than Lucy Westenra this woman was, her hands more slender, and there was a small mole at the corner of her rouged lips.

Then Adrienne Monnier was gone, pulled back into the crowd by a fat woman in an ugly ostrich-plumed hat, leaving Mina alone with Anna Carmichael. Behind her, the divided Surrealists argued, a threadbare quarrel and wearisome zeal.

“I’ve been reading you since ‘The White Angel of Carfax,’ and last year, my God, last year I read ‘Canto Babel’ in *Harper’s*. In America, Miss Murray, they’re saying that you’re the new Poe, that you make Le Fanu and all those silly Victorians look –”

“Yes, well,” she began, uncertain what she meant to say, only meaning to interrupt. The dizziness, sharpening unreality, was rushing back and she leaned against a shelf for support.

“Miss Murray?” And a move, then, as if to catch someone who had stumbled, long fingers alert. Anna Carmichael took a cautious step forward, closing the space between them.

“Mina, please, just call me Mina.”

“Are you…”

“Yes,” but she was sweating again. “Forgive me, Anna. Just a little too much wine on an empty stomach.”

“Then please, let me take you to dinner.”

Lips pursed, Mina bit the tip of her tongue, biting hard enough to bring a salted hint of blood, and the world began to tilt back into focus, the syrupy blackness at the edges of her vision withdrawing by degrees.

“Oh, no. I couldn’t,” she managed. “Really, it’s not…”

But the woman was already taking her by the arm, crescent moon smile baring teeth like perfectly spaced pearls, every bit the forceful American. She thought of Quincey Morris, and wondered if this woman had ever been to Texas.

“But I insist, Mina. It’ll be an honor, and in return, well, I won’t feel so guilty if I talk too much.”

Together, arm in arm, they elbowed their way through the Surrealist blockade, the men choosing to ignore them. Except the gaunt albino, and Mina imagined something passing between him and Anna Carmichael, unspoken, or simply unspeakable.

“I hate those idiot bastards,” Anna whispered as the door jangled shut behind them. She held Mina’s hand tightly, squeezing warmth into her clammy palm, and surprising herself, Mina squeezed back.

Out on the gas lit rue de l’Odéon, a warm spring breeze was blowing, and the night air smelled like coming rain.

The meal had been good, though Mina had hardly tasted the little she’d eaten. Cold chicken and bread, salad with wild thyme and goat cheese, chewed and swallowed indifferently. And more than her share from a large carafe of some anonymous red Bordeaux. She’d listened to the woman who was not Lucy talk, endless talk of Anna Carmichael’s copious ideas on the macabre and of Mina’s writing.

“I actually went to the Carfax estate,” she’d said, and then paused as if she had expected some particular reaction. “Just last summer. There’s some restoration underway there now, you know.”

“No,” Mina answered, sipping her wine and picking apart a strip of white meat with her fork. “No, I wasn’t aware of that.”

Finally, the waitress had brought their bill, and Anna had grudgingly allowed Mina to leave the tip. While they’d eaten, a shower had come and gone, leaving the night dank and chilly, unusually quiet. Their heels

sounded like passing time on the wet cobblestones. Anna Carmichael had a room in one of the less expensive Left Bank hotels, but they walked together back to Mina's flat.

When Mina woke, it was raining again, and for a few uncounted minutes she lay still, listening, smelling the sweat and incense, a hint of rose and lilac in the sheets. Finally, there was only a steady drip, falling perhaps from the leaky gutters of the old building, and maybe from the eaves, striking the flagstones in the little garden. She could still smell Anna Carmichael on her skin. Mina closed her eyes and thought about going back to sleep, realizing only very slowly that she was now alone in the bed.

The rain was over and the drip – the minute and measured splash of water on water, that clockwork cadence – *wasn't* coming from outside. She opened her eyes and rolled over, into the cold and hollow place made by Anna's absence. The lavatory light was burning; Mina blinked and called her name, calling

Lucy

"Anna?"

drip and drip and drip and

"Anna?" and her throat tightened, whatever peace she'd awakened with leached away by fear and adrenaline. "Anna, are you all right?"

did you call for Lucy, at first, did I

drip and drip and

The floor was cold against her feet. Mina stepped past the chiffonier, bare floorboards giving way to a time- and mildew- and foot-dulled mosaic of ceramic polygons. Some of the tiles were missing, leaving dirty, liver-colored cavities in the design. The big tub, chipped alabaster enamel, the black iron showing through. Lion's feet claws frozen in molded rictus, grappling for some hold on the slick tiles.

Lucy Westenra lay, empty again, in the tub filled almost to overflowing. Each drop of water swelled like an abscess until its own weight tore it free of the brass faucet and so it fell, losing itself in the crimson water. The suicide's wrists hung limply over the sides of the bath, hands open; her head tilted back at a broken angle. And there were three bright smiles carved into her flesh, all of them offered to Heaven, or only to Mina.

The straight razor lay, its blade glinting sticky scarlet, on the floor where it had fallen from Lucy's hand. And, like the dripping water, Mina

stood until gravity pulled her free, and she fell.

October 1946

After the latest war and the ammonia antiseptic rooms where electrodes bridged the writhing space between her eyes with their deadening quick sizzle, after the long years that she was kept safe from herself and the suicidal world kept safe from her, Mina Murray came back to London.

A new city to embrace the mopwater-grey Thames, changed utterly, scarred by the Luftwaffe's firestorms and aged by the twenty-four years of her absence. She'd spent three days walking the streets, destruction like a maze for her to solve or discard in frustration. At Aldermanbury, she stood before the ruins of St. Mary's and imagined – no, wished – her hands around Van Helsing's neck. His brittle old bones to break apart like charred timbers and shattered pews. *Is* this *it, you old bastard? Is this what we saved England for?*

And the question, recognizing its own intrinsic senselessness, its inherent futility, had hung nowhere, like all those blown-out windows framing the autumn-blue sky, the hallways ending only in rubble. Or her reflection, the woman a year from seventy looking back from a windowpane that seemed to have somehow escaped destruction especially for the purpose, this moment; a year from seventy, and she almost looked it. Time was catching up.

The boy sitting on the wall watched the woman get out of the taxi, old woman in black stockings and a black dress with a high collar, her eyes hidden behind dark spectacles. He absently released the small brown lizard he'd been tormenting, and it skittered gratefully away into some crack or crevice in the tumbledown masonry. The boy thought the woman looked like a widow, but better to pretend she was a spy for the Gerrys on a clandestine rendezvous, secrets to be exchanged for better secrets. She walked in short steps that seemed like maybe she was counting off the distance between them. In the cool, bright morning, her shoes clicked, a coded signal click, possibly Morse-code click, and he thought perhaps he should quickly hide himself behind the crumbling wall, but then she saw him, and it was too late as the taxi pulled away. Too late, so he waved back, and there, she was just an old woman again.

“Hello,” she said, fishing about, then, for something in her handbag. She took out a cigarette, and when he asked, the widow gave him one also. She lit it for him with a silver lighter and turned to stare at the gutted ruins of Carfax Abbey, at the broken, precarious walls braced against their inevitable collapse. Noisy larks and sparrows sang to themselves in the blasted trees, and farther on, the duck pond glinted in the sun.

The woman leaned against the wall and sighed out smoke.

“They didn’t leave much, did they?” she asked him.

“No, Ma’am,” he said. “It was one of them doodlebugs last year that got it,” and he rocket-whistled for her, descending octaves and a big rumbling boom stuck on the end.

The woman nodded and crushed her cigarette out against a raw edge of mortar, ground it back and forth, the ash smear black against oatmeal grey, and the butt dropped at her feet.

“It’s haunted, you know,” the boy told her, “Mostly at night, though.” She smiled and he glimpsed her nicotine-stained teeth past the magenta bruise of her lips. She nodded again.

“Yes,” she said. “Yes, I guess that it is, isn’t it?”

Mina killed the boy well back from the road, the straight razor she’d bought in Cheapside slipped out of her purse while he was digging about for bits of shrapnel to show her, jagged souvenirs of a pleasant autumn afternoon in Purfleet. One gloved hand fast over his mouth and only the smallest muffled sound of surprise before she drew the blade quick across his throat, and the boy’s life sprayed out dark and wet against the flagstones. He was the first murder she’d done since returning to England, and so she sat with him a while in the chilly shade of the tilted wall, his blood drying to a crust around her mouth. Once, she heard a dog barking excitedly off towards the wreck that had been Jack Seward’s asylum such a long time ago. There was a shiver of adrenaline and her heart skipped a beat, raced for a moment because she thought maybe someone was coming, that she’d been discovered. But no one came, and so she sat with the boy and wondered at the winding knot of emptiness still inside her, unchanged and, evidently, unchangeable.

An hour later, she left the boy beneath a scraggly hedgerow and went to wash her hands and face in the sparkling pool. If there were ghosts at Carfax, they kept their distance.

August 1955

The cramped and cluttered office on West Houston even hotter than usual, the Venetian blinds drawn to keep the sun out, so only the soft glow from Audry Cavanaugh's brass desk lamp, a gentle incandescence through the green glass shade. But no matter to the sticky, resolute Manhattan summer. The office was sweltering, and Mina had to piss again. Her bladder ached and she sweated and wrinkled her nose at the stale, heavy smell of the expensive English cigarettes the psychoanalyst chain-smoked. A framed and faded photograph of Carl Jung dangled on its hook behind the desk, and Mina felt his grey and knowing eyes, wanting inside her, wanting to see and know and draw reason from insanity.

"You're looking well today, Wilhelmina," Dr. Cavanaugh said, then offered a terse smile. She lit another cigarette and exhaled a great cloud into the torpid air of the office. The smoke settled about her head like a shroud. "Sleeping any better?"

"No," Mina told her, which was true. "Not really." Not with the nightmares and the traffic sounds all night outside her SoHo apartment, the restless voices from the street that she could never be sure weren't meant for her. And not with the heat, either, like a living thing to smother her, to hold the world perpetually at the edge of conflagration.

"I'm very sorry," and Dr. Cavanaugh was squinting at her through the gauze of smoke, her stingy smile already traded for familiar concern. Audry Cavanaugh never seemed to sweat, always so cool in her mannish suits, her hair pulled back in its neat, tight bun.

"Did you speak with your friend in London?" Mina asked. "You said you would." And maybe the psychoanalyst heard the strain in Mina's voice, because she sighed a loud, impatient sigh and tilted her head backwards, gazing up at the ceiling.

"Yes," she said, "I've talked with Dr. Beecher. Just yesterday, actually."

Mina licked her lips, her dry tongue drawn across drier lips, the parched skin of dead fruit. There was a moment of silence, a pause, and then Audry Cavanaugh said, "He was able to find a number of references to attacks on children by a 'bloofer lady,' some articles dating from late in September, 1897, in *The Westminster Gazette* and a few other papers. A

couple of pieces on the wreck at Whitby, also. “But, Mina, I never *said* I doubted you. You didn’t have to prove anything.”

“I *had* those clippings,” Mina mumbled around her dry tongue. “I used to have *all* the clippings.”

“I always believed that you did.”

There was more silence, then, and only street sounds ten stories down to fill the void. Dr. Cavanaugh put on her reading glasses and opened her yellow stenographer’s pad. Her pencil scritched across the paper to record the date. “The dreams, are they still about Lucy? Or is it the asylum again?”

And a drop of sweat ran slowly down Mina’s rouged cheek, pooling at the corner of her mouth, abrupt tang of salt and cosmetics to tease her thirst. She looked away, at the worn and dusty rug under her shoes, at the barrister shelves stuffed with medical books and psychological journals. The framed diplomas and, almost whispering, she said, “I had a dream about the world.”

“Yes?” and Audry Cavanaugh sounded a little eager, because here was something new, perhaps, something novel in old Mina Murray’s tiresome parade of delusions. “What did you dream about the world, Wilhelmina?”

Another drop of sweat dissolved on the tip of Mina’s tongue, leaving behind the musky, fleeting taste of herself and fading too soon. “I dreamed that the world was dead,” she said. “That the world ended a long, long time ago. But it doesn’t know it’s dead, and all that’s left of the world is the dream of a ghost.”

For a few minutes neither of them said anything more, and so there was only the sound of the psychoanalyst’s pencil, and then not even that. Mina listened to the street, the cars and trucks, the city. The sun made blazing slashes through the aluminum blinds, and Audry Cavanaugh struck a match, lighting another cigarette. The stink of sulfur made Mina’s nose wrinkle.

“Do you think that’s true, Mina?”

And Mina closed her eyes, wanting to be alone with the weary, constant rhythm of her heart, the afterimages like burn-scar slashes in the dark behind her vellum eyelids. She was too tired for confession or memory today, too uncertain to commit her scattered thoughts to words; she drifted, and there was no intrusion from patient Cavanaugh, and in a few minutes she was asleep.

April 1969

After she's swallowed the capsules and a mouthful of plastic-flavored water from the blue pitcher on her night stand, after Brenda Neufield and her white shoes have left the hospital room, Mina sits up. She wrestles the safety bar down, and her legs swing slowly, painfully, over and off the edge of the bed. She watches her bare feet dangling above the linoleum floor, her ugly yellowed toenails, age spots and parchment skin stretched too tightly over kite-frame bones.

A week ago, after her heart attack and the ambulance from her shitty little apartment, there was the emergency room and the doctor who smiled at her and said, "You're a pip, Miss Murray. I have sixty-year old patients who should be glad to look half so good as you."

She waits, counting the nurse's footsteps – twelve, thirteen, fourteen – and surely Neufield's at the desk by now, going back to her magazines. And Mina sits, staring across the room, her back to the window, cowardice to pass for defiance.

If she had a razor, or a kitchen knife, or a few more of Neufield's tranquilizer pills.

If she had the courage.

Later, when the rain has stopped, and the crape myrtle has settled down for the night, the nurse comes back and finds her dozing, still perched upright on the edge of her bed like some silly parakeet or geriatric gargoyle. She eases Mina back and there's a dull click as the safety bar locks again. The nurse mumbles something so low Mina can't make out the words. So, she lies very still, instead, lies on starch-stiff sheets and her pillowcase and listens to the drip and patter from the street outside, velvet sounds after the storm enough to smooth the edges off Manhattan for a few hours. The blanket tucked roughly beneath her chin and taxi wheels on the street, the honk of a car horn, a police siren blocks away. And footsteps on the sidewalk below her window, and then the soft and unmistakable pad of wolf paws on asphalt.

The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned…
W. B. Yeats, "The Second Coming" (1919)

Emptiness Spoke Eloquent

At twenty-nine, my ambition often got the better my abilities, and I frequently bit off more than my talent could chew. But, never believing the final paragraphs of Stoker’s novel, seeing an inherent insincerity meant to subvert everything good about *Dracula*, I had to try to find the *truth* of what became of Mina.

Two Worlds and In Between

At the crumbling edge of the pit, and it seems like she's been standing there forever, when the fever breaks and Twila opens her eyes. She has to blink three or four times before they even begin to focus, and they still burn and water from the greasy corpse smoke and the faintest sharpness of disappointment, dissolving with the dream. Across the little room, her Salvation Army dressing table and from the cracked mirror, Peter Murphy pouts and his lips are the bruised color of eggplant. On the floor, the candlelight is drowning itself in a cranberry pool of liquid wax.

She lies very still, listening for the sound that woke her, remembering where she is and that apocalypse has come and gone and she's still here. The bedroom stinks of old puke and shit and something gone over.

Blondie is asleep in the ratty armchair pulled up beside their bed, head drooping down so his chin rests on his bare chest. He isn't wearing a shirt, just a pair of black panties and a garter and black fishnets with the feet cut out. Snoring softly, his breath whistling in and out. And down on the street, dead guys growl and thump along the sidewalk.

Nothing else, and nothing any different than before.

She's still alive or she's dead.

"Blondie?" she means to whisper, but her throat feels like she's been knocking back Drano shooters and it comes out a strangled, zombiefied sound.

"*Blondie,*" and this time his eyelashes flutter and his head snaps back, dark eyes clogged with interrupted sleep and confusion and fear.

"Twila?" and he sounds lost and far away. "Jesus, Twila. Are you…" but there's no sense in asking and instead he fumbles for her wrist, pressing his thumb to botched suicide scar tissue and the blue-green intersection of veins and arteries.

She can feel the faint throb of her pulse pressed beneath her brother's touch. And so she knows even before the relief in his eyes and the ghost of a smile.

Blondie wipes at her forehead with a sponge cut in the shape of a pink flamingo, pushing aside her ink-black bangs. She tries to sit up, but he makes her lie right back down on the tangle of sweat-damp sheets. Her

pillow is crusty and stiff with dried snot and blood; she doesn't have to look to know that she's shit herself.

"I feel better," she says, shaky, but almost her own voice this time, and then there is no strength left to say anything else. Blondie is crying and he hugs her tight, shit stains and all, strokes her matted hair, and holds her till dawn.

Her head feels empty, scooped clean by the dream and the fever and filled with angry, buzzing hornets. A stingy breeze whips at the curtains, rearranging the heat.

She sits on the floor, in cool shadows where the late morning sun doesn't reach, and begins to unwrap her hand, winding away the sticky gauze, pus-yellowed and it still hurts like a motherfucker. Blondie has gone to get her a glass of water and see if there's any booze left. The last layer is stuck to her skin by big, scabby magenta blotches, but when she pulls it free there's only a little blood and a faint whiff of ammonia.

(buzzbuzzbuzz)

And the perfect crescent of Arlene's kiss underneath; Twila turns her hand over and there it is again, incisor and canine and bicuspid punctures tattooed into her palm. Life line and heart line and soul line severed. Twila tries to make a fist and the swollen flesh cracks, drains about her wrist like an amber bracelet and trickles to the floor.

She feels dizzy again and has to brace herself against the wall. Her hand looks like a picture she once saw of a brown recluse spider bite and she remembers a word, *necrosis*.

Down the hall, Arlene slams herself against the bathroom door. There are split places in the wood and the paint's peeling away from the blows, but Blondie's dragged the sofa and a table and all kinds of shit to barricade her in.

"Go right ahead, bitch," Twila mutters at the door. "Knock yourself fuckin' goofy. See if I care."

Arlene moans and gurgles and hits the door again.

(buzzbuzzzz)

Then Blondie comes out of the kitchen with Twila's Catwoman tumbler and an almost empty bottle of Papov vodka, trying not to notice the sounds from the bathroom. He sits down next to his sister, pours the vodka into the cup and mixes with an index finger.

“I don’t think she can get out,” he says uncertainly.

Twila sips her drink and glances towards the door.

“Find me a hammer and I’ll fuckin’ nail the bitch in,” she says and takes a bigger swallow. Lukewarm, and the alcohol burns going down.

“I was so scared, Twila,” he says, and now he’s staring at anything but her eyes. “I thought you were dying, that you were gonna wind up like her. *Hear* her? She gets worse and worse, and then the power went out last night and…”

If I open my mouth, they’ll all fly out, and she sees the wriggling black and yellow bodies clinging to Blondie’s face, digging their stinger-tipped asses into his pale cheeks and clenched eyelids, trying to crawl inside his nose.

“…there wasn’t anything left on television anyway. Just fucking snow and test patterns.”

And Arlene throws herself extra hard against the bathroom door. Twila closes her eyes and listens to her brother and the hornets and the wail of a siren far away.

The end of the world rave had been Twila’s idea.

And the twins played host and hostess for the grannybitch of all wakes, mourning the late and great and the soon to be sinking fast in their finest blacks, in silk and lace and lips so red that eyes would bleed in sympathy. Thirty or forty people wedged into the little apartment like sardines canned alive, writhing to goth and techno and industrial remix. No AC because their wheezy-ass window unit hadn’t survived last August; sweat and body odor and the freshly-turned dirt reek of patchouli. Tea rose and clove cigarettes.

Sometime after midnight, Twila realized how badly she needed to piss, had entirely lost track of the tequila and cans of someone else’s beer she’d drunk, and threaded her way through the dancers to the bathroom. And really, she’d thought that Arlene had just passed out, had speedballed herself a first-class, round-trip ticket to see Mr. Sandman; leave her alone, she’ll be fine in the morning.

“You’re lookin’ a little green, Arlene,” and she laughed and rolled Arlene away from the toilet bowl, flushed and watched the dark vomit turn its Charybdis trick. Arlene lay slumped against the tub, eyes rolled back to whites, lips the slightest touch of blue. Twila, drunk and off-balance,

wrestled her leather mini-skirt up and pantyhose down around knee-high Doc Martens, was sitting on the crapper before she noticed the urine pool covering half the bathroom floor. Through the piss-sheen, the powder blue linoleum looked turquoise.

She'd left the door standing wide open and someone looked in, Dougie and his spiky orange buzz cut. He held his nose and made gagging sounds until she gave him the finger. A moment later, she heard him laughing, cracking golden-shower jokes. "Sure," Twila told him, "just get in line."

Then Arlene opened her mouth and belched, an ugly, rattling sound, and her whole body shuddered like maybe a possum had walked across her grave.

"Hey bitch, you pissed on my floor," Twila said.

Arlene blinked, reptile slow. Milky irises washed almost grey, a watery blind-girl stare, the barest hint of recognition, and then that shudder again.

"Arlene, if you're gonna puke, be a dear and do it in the tub, *pretty please."* Twila tore off a big wad of their cheap, scratchy toilet paper and wiped herself.

Then Arlene lurched forward, marionette jerky spasms and her teeth clack-clacking together like some idiot Halloween toy. She sprawled face down into Twila's lap, nuzzling her way between thighs, and for a heartbeat Twila was too astounded to move. Then Arlene snarled, Christ, *snarled,* and the ripping that Twila heard and felt was the mouthful of blonde pubic hair clenched between the Arlene's cigarette-yellowed teeth.

The clouded eyes sparked and sputtered, all pupil, barely the slimmest iris rind; the light they swallowed was just fucking gone.

Twila screamed, never in her life had she filled her lungs and screamed, screeched like some slasher-movie bimbo. She tried to push the girl away, twined her fingers in hennaed tangle, but Arlene wrapped her long arms tightly around the porcelain bowl and hung on.

And then Dougie was back at the door, stupid grin and stoned glaze, right hand gripping a beer bottle like it was his dick.

"Jesus, Dougie! Get her off me!" And no way had that been her voice, not that frightened, brittle thing leapfrogging octaves.

Arlene strained against the hair leash, snapping and spittle-flecking Twila's exposed legs.

"You girls are some mighty sick puppies," Dougie said and swigged at his beer.

Arlene lunged, velcro *shrrrip* as she tore herself free, and Twila was left holding a useless fistful of hair. Arlene's head whirled, lips stretched so far back the teeth seemed to reach out as her mouth closed around Twila's hand. Teeth punching through skin and muscle. Crushing teeth, grinding bones like twigs wrapped in meat, and the pain was something almost alive, dragging itself up her arm like fire or a stranded jellyfish or when they were eight and Blondie had closed her hand in the car door.

She released Arlene's hair, hammering at her face now, and finally Dougie moved, but only because Blondie was behind him, shoving him aside. Blondie, yelling things she couldn't understand, could hardly even hear through the red haze settling into her head. The wet slap of her hand against Arlene's face, her nose already squashed to pulp and blood, and the chewing sounds.

Something catching light at the end of his arm, a blow dryer arcing down through the 25-watt incandescence, and the force of each and every wallop passed along to her secondhand through Arlene's grip.

"Stop it, man! *Stop it!*" Dougie screamed, reached for Blondie. "You're gonna fucking *kill* her, man!"

And Blondie, those *weren't* words, far too perfect an expression of her own confusion and pain and anger for words. One last time the handle of the blow dryer connected with Arlene's face and the plastic shattered and bone snapped and Twila's hand slid from slack and broken jaws.

Twila crawled, scrambled, slinging crimson and skidding on piss-sticky linoleum past Dougie, into the hall and the murmuring press of bodies gathering for the show.

When the twins gave a party, everybody came.

Past noon, and the day drifts into mid-summer scorch and the water-lie shimmer of blacktop mirage. The syrupy scent of kudzu through the window isn't all that different from the zombie rot that seems to get stronger whenever Arlene starts flinging herself against the bathroom door.

The twins are on the floor where it's a little cooler, Twila's head resting in her brother's bony lap. Running down the batteries in their portable CD player, This Mortal Coil and the Cocteau Twins, nothing harder because her head still thrums, the buzzing at the base of her skull spreading slowly as the hornets honeycomb her brain. Her stomach's churning from the pointless bout with lunch, hardly three bites of the

cheddar cheese and stale bagel sandwich before she threw it right back up. She wants to doze, wants to dream back down to the dead pit where the hornets and the sounds from the bathroom can't find her.

Blondie's brushing her hair, working out the tangles and rat-nest snarls, and Twila knows he's only singing with the boom box so she won't see how freaked out he is. If she avoids his face, it might even work. She closes her eyes, focusing on the voices and the melody and the pleasant prick of the brush's teeth on her scalp.

"Listen," he says. "*There*. Did you hear it?"

Twila opens her eyes and stares up at the three rosaries hung around his neck, onyx black beads and three perfect crucifixions, and she listens.

Somewhere down the street, gunshots and the hot squeal of tires. Men shouting and one more shot that sounds somehow very final. But no sirens, no sirens for hours now, and she wonders if all the cops are finally dead, or if they're just hiding somewhere.

"That was close," Blondie says, and the fear edging back into his voice makes the hornets wriggle and buzz.

"Hey, Abbott," she says, straining for her own voice through the gravel rasp. "Which is easier to unload, a truckload of bowling balls or a truckload of dead babies?"

But he's still watching the open window and the simmering chrome sky and doesn't even seem to notice. And fuck, she feels way too shitty to joke, but the pinched desperation around his mouth and his pecan-shell eyes is worse.

"Dead babies," he answers, when he finally answers, "You can use a pitchfork."

"And what's *worse* than a truckload of dead babies?"

"A live one at the bottom," he says, "eating its way to the top."

"And what's even worse than *that*?"

He misses his cue. Down the street, brakes shriek before the crash.

"Blondie?"

"It makes it," he says.

Under a sallow, pig-belly sky, the dead pit yawns and breathes out charcoal smoke and the gentle grey sift of ashes. Twila steps closer to the edge and broken shale crunches beneath her boots.

Behind her, the sleepless dead shuffle and grunt, a zombie halo that winds sloppy single file along the rim of the pit, the clockwise march of leaden feet. Occasionally, something tears and drops loose and is kicked and stomped to paste. Any pretense at difference in the faces is merely hollow variation on a single, sloughing theme.

No sound from the pit but the pop and crackle of burning. Like rain, she thinks, the sizzle of a thundershower, and above her the grey-green-yellow sky rumbles smugly to itself. Lightning as black and flat as a dead girl's eyes needles down at the smoldering world and is instantly sucked back into the roil and tumble of the clouds.

When it starts, the rain does not fall but seeps slomo from the wounded sky in oily, pus-sludgy drops.

Twila turns her face up to the storm, flinching when the first lukewarm drops strike her cheeks and forehead. Another thunderclap rattles the hive behind her eyes and jointed legs skitter and tickle their way from her sinuses down the back of her throat. She gags, coughing out a phlegmy clot of hornets, and already there are that many more filling her mouth again, whirring wings and restless barbs. They crawl across the threshold of her lips, climb from her nostrils and ears.

The rain becomes a downpour, sheeting corruption, pelting her, soaking her until her hair is slick and her clothes cling to her skin. Behind her, zombie feet suck and slap mud and wet stone.

The tease of a thousand ribbon tongues as the insects take the nectar rot from her face, and clambering over one another, carry full bellies back inside her skull. Twila waits, patient, until they've all finished and her jaw aches and the rain is barely a sour mist.

Was it this easy for Eve, she thinks. The fading thunder is the steel clang of garden gates swinging shut and locks clasped against her.

Down in the dead pit, steam rises from charred bones and the shapeless burning things.

The sound is the creak of timbers deep in the hold of a movie-set pirate ship, grating wood-rhythm swing to the list and reel of a tireless ocean. For the time that it takes for late afternoon to fade to twilight and then the first smudges of night, Twila lies very still, keeping her back to the sound. There are no street lights anymore, no tangerine glow from the neon bar sign across the street. No phantom wash of headlights from the viaduct.

But she has the hornets' rustling instruction, ten thousand small voices in hushed and honeyed chorus, to play over and over in her mind.

This finalmost catechism, these obvious do's and don't's for a new order of one. Miss Manners for the shiny thing sprung from its chrysalis of fever and dreams.

So she doesn't have to see anything until she's ready.

Arlene begins the gentlest assault on the bathroom door, irregular thuds and raw-knuckled raps.

Twila rolls over, and there's no surprise in the dangling limpness of her brother's body, nothing past mute fact. For a while, she sits on the floor and watches the short arc and sway of his bare feet, toes pointed gracelessly down, meat pendulum skimming inches above the fallen kitchen chair. The breeze smells like rain and ozone and the day's heat bleeding off into space. The leather belt noose creaks and strains, tied snugly around exposed plumbing painted the same latex oyster white as the ceiling.

She finds a knife and cuts him down, standing on the same chair he stood on and sawing through black leather and between studs and spikes. Halfway through, his weight does the rest. She tries to catch him under the arms but it's too much and Blondie drops loudly to the floor. His head smacks the wood, and she just stands there, holding the big knife, looking down on this pale, boy-shaped puddle.

He'd had his razor blades out again and his belly and thighs and the palms of his hands are sliced like fish gills. When she squats down on the chair she sees the single word carved small into his hip. SORRY.

Twila sits in the chair, jumping off point, she thinks and raises the knife above her head, drives it to the hilt into the soft place below his breastbone. Through skin and muscle and soft, dead organs. She yanks it free, and now her hands are stained slippery black, and the blood makes the air stink like a jar of old pennies.

The wailing starts way down inside her, core shatter, swelling and looping on itself, feedbacking into something that has sickle claws and shreds the still darkness as the blade plunges in again and again and again.

Afterwards, she watches to be sure. She crouches in the chair and rests her head on knees drawn close, hums Hendrix, hey joe, hey joe, and the knife hangs slack in her left hand. To be sure she understands the hornets, that she's read between all the lines and has the whole skinny. That

whatever brought her through the fever will keep her brother down. But Blondie's a good dead boy; there'll be no Lazarus games tonight.

buzzbuzzbuzZBUZZBUZZ, the hornets babble and an emptiness as wide as the gangrene sky above the dead pit opens up inside her; perfect pretty nothing ballooning from her guts like a suckling universe, devouring regret and fear and loss. Shitting out crystal certainty and black and keening appetite.

"Arlene?" she whispers. Twila has pushed away the sofa and the table and all the other shit blockading the bathroom, and she presses her face and palms to the tortured door. The silence on the other side is solid and cold. Palpable.

"Hey, Arlene. You pissed on my floor, you stupid zombie bitch." And she thinks that that's the first time since it began that she's said the Z-word out loud.

The stench is dizzying, and she knows that when she turns the brass knob and pushes the door the trapped air will roll out like an invisible, septic fog. She opens her mouth to say something else and the words drown in the thick spill of saliva. Twila wipes her chin dry with the back of her hand, wipes her hand on her T-shirt. And the door scrapes softly across age-buckled linoleum and the hinges murmur.

Nothing could have ever prepared her for this, this tangible thing that floods her head in waves of smothering acid sweetness, the air soupy fermentation of rancid pork and worm-ripe windfall peaches and cheesy musk. This is not simple scent or taste or anything else hemmed in by mere sensation. The hornets are a howling locust cacophony and Twila gasps, reaching through the blackness for support. She blinks back vertigo and squints.

A single rectangle of weaker darkness, night filtered dim through filthy curtains high above the tub.

"Arlene?"

Somewhere ahead, a liquid whimper and weight hauled by broken hands; glistening fear stitched against the murk in shades of colors Twila's never seen before. She takes another step and her foot brushes soft and leaking Arlene, and the dead girl moans and pulls herself *thunk* into the bathtub. A fading part of Twila's mind, sealed deep inside the maze of waxy

hexagons, bothers to wonder how much got left behind on the floor, because whatever she touched is still there.

Twila's stomach growls as she bends over the tub, and her newfound hunger is almost as monstrous as the sounds rattling up from the zombie's ruined throat.

In the final gunmetal velvet moments before dawn, she walks alone through the silent streets of the city, past smoking tenement embers and abandoned cars and a hundred other cliché spectacles of spent apocalypse. The dead know her, smell the discrepant blend of warm meat and the green-black decay that stains her face and hands and clothing. They are never more than hesitant shadows, cowering shamblers, fleeting butcheries. And the living are only a rumor on the drowsy lips of the night.

Behind her eyes, the hornets have gone, and her mind is as still and silent as the morning. Her nose drips honey.

She reaches the crest of a hill, dead-end street and a rust and Bondo Corvette shell is slewed crazily across the yellow dividing line. The driver's side door is open and the threadbare upholstery is soaked maroon. Twila sits down on the hood, and already, where the trees and rooftops touch the eastern sky, the light is making promises she knows it can't keep.

Two Worlds and In Between

An editor (doesn't matter who) said, "Write me a zombie story. You know, like George Romero." He didn't say that exactly. I'm paraphrasing. This was supposed to be my "big break"; it wasn't even close. Anyway, I wrote a zombie story, but not much like George Romero. "When the twins gave a party, everybody came." That's the very best of it, I think.

To This Water

(Johnstown, Pennsylvania 1889)

1.

Hardly dawn, and already Magda had made her way through the forest into the glittering frost at the foot of the Johnstown dam. When the sun climbed high enough, it would push aside the shadows and set the hollow on fire, sparkling crystal fire that would melt gently in the late spring sunrise and drip from hemlock and aspen branches, glaze the towering thickets of mountain laurel, later rise again as gauzy, soft steam. Everything, ice-crisped ferns and everything else, crunched beneath her shoes, loud in the cold, still air; no sound but morning birds and the steady gush from the spillway into South Fork Creek, noisy and secretive, like careless whispers behind her back.

Winded, her breath puffing out white through chapped lips and a stitch nagging her side, she rested a moment against a potato-shaped boulder, and the moss there frost-stiffened, too, ice-matted green fur and grey lichens like scabs. Back down the valley towards South Fork, night held on, a lazy thing curled in the lee of the mountain. Magda shivered and pulled her shawl tighter about her shoulders.

All the way from Johnstown since nightfall, fifteen miles or more since she'd slipped away from the darkened rows of company houses on Prospect Hill, following the railroad first and later, after the sleeping streets of South Fork, game trails and, finally, the winding creek, yellow-brown and swollen with the runoff of April thaw and heavy May rains. By now her family would be awake, her father already gone to the mill and twelve hours at the furnaces, her mother and sister neglecting chores, and soon they would be asking from house to house, porches and back doors.

But no one had seen her go, and there would be nothing but concerned and shaking heads, shrugs and suspicion for their questions and broken English. And when they'd gone, there would be whispers, like the murmur and purl of mountain streams.

As the sky faded from soft violet, unbruising, Magda turned and began to pick her way up the steep and rocky face of the dam.

This is not memory, this is a pricking new thing, time knotted, cat's cradled or snarled like her sister's brown hair. Magda is always closing her eyes, always opening them again, and always the narrow slit of sky is red, a wound-red slash between the alley's black walls and rooftops, pine and shingle jaws. And there is nothing left of the men but callused, groping fingers, the scalding whiskey sour-sweetness of their breath. Sounds like laughter from dog throats and the whiskery lips of pigs, dogs and pigs laughing if they could.

And Magda does not scream, because they have said that if she screams, if she cries or even speaks they will cut her tongue out, will cut her bohunk throat from ear to ear, and she knows enough English to understand their threats. The big Irishman has shown her his knife; they will all show her their knives, and cut her, whether she screams or not.

The hands pushing and she turns her face away, better the cool mud, the water puddled that flows into her mouth, fills her nostrils, that tastes like earth and rot and the alcohol from empty barrels and overflowing crates of bottles stacked high behind the Washington Street saloon. She grinds her teeth, crunching grit, sand sharp against her gums.

And before she shuts her eyes, last thing before there is only raw pain and the sounds she won't ever forget, Magda catches the dapper man watching from the far-away end of the alley, his surprised face peering down the well. Staring slack-jawed, and light from somewhere safe glints coldly off his spectacles, moonlight on thin ice.

The demons growl, and he scuttles away, and they fold her open like a cockleshell.

By the wavering orange oil light, her mother's face had glowed warm, age and weariness softened almost away, and she had been speaking to them in Magyar, even though Papa said that they'd never learn English that way. She had leaned over them, brushing Magda's sister's hair back from her face. Her mother had set the lamp carefully down on the wobbly little table beside their bed, set herself in the wobbly chair. It had still been winter that night, still dirty snow on the ground out side, the wind around the pine-board corners of the house, howling for its own misfortunes. And two daughters, Magda and little Emilia, bundled safe beneath quilts and rag-swaddled bricks from the hearth at their feet.

Magda had watched the shadows thrown across the walls, walls bare save knotholes stuffed with old newspapers and the crucifix her mother had brought across from Budapest, blood-dark wood and tortured pewter. And the lamp light had danced as her mother spoke, seeming to follow the rise and fall of her words, measured steps in a pattern too subtle for Magda to follow.

So she had closed her eyes tightly, burying her face in pillows and Emilia's back, and listened to her mother's stories of childhood in the mountain village of Tátra Lomnitz and the wild Carpathians, listening more to her soothing voice than the words themselves. She knew all the old stories of the house elves, the hairy little domovoy that had lived in the dust and sooty corner behind her grandmother's stove, and the river people, the vodyaniye and rusalka; the comfort her sister drew from the fairy tales, she took directly from the music of timbre and tender intonation.

"And in the autumn," her mother had said, "when a fat gander was offered to the people who lived under the lake, we would first cut off its head and nail it to the barn door so that our domovoy would not know that one of his geese had been given away to another."

And then, sometime later, the lamp was lifted from the wobbly table, and her mother had kissed them both, Magda pretending to sleep, and whispered, her voice softer than the bed, "*Jó éjszakát kívánok,*" her bare footsteps already moving away, sounding hollow on the floor, when Emilia had corrected her, "Good night, Mama."

"Good night, Emilia," her mother had answered, and then they'd been alone with the night and the wind and the sky outside their window that was never quite black enough for stars, but always stained red from the belching foundry fires of Johnstown.

It was full morning by the time Magda reached the top of the dam, and her eyes stung with her own sweat. When she licked her lips she tasted her own salt; not the taste of blood, but something close to blood. Her dress clung wetly to her back, to clammy, damp armpits, and she'd ripped her skirt and stockings on blackberry briars and creeper vines. Twice, she'd slipped on the loose stones, and there was a small gash on her left palm, purpling bruise below her thumb. Now she stood a moment on the narrow road that stretched across the breast of the dam, listening to her heart beat

beneath cotton and skin, muscle and bone. Watching the mist, milky wisps curling up from the green-grey water, burning away in the sun.

Up here, the morning smelled clean, pine and the silent lake, no hint of the valley's pall of coal dust or factory smoke. There were clouds drifting slowly in from the southwest, scowling, steel-bellied thunderheads, and so the breeze smelled faintly of rain and ozone as well.

Magda stepped across the road, over deep buggy ruts, pressing her own shallow prints into the clay. The pockets of her skirt bulged with the rocks she'd gathered as she climbed, weather-smoothed shale and gritty sandstone cobbles the color of dried apricots. Four steps across, and on the other side, the bank dropped away sharply, steep, but only a few feet down to water, choked thick with cattails and weeds.

Quickest glance, then, back over her shoulder, not bothering to turn full and play Lot's wife proper. The fire burned *inside* her, a scorching, righteous flame shining through her eyes, inca pable of cleansing, only scarring and salting her brain. And, carefully, Magda went down to the cold water.

When they have all finished with her, each in his turn, when they have carved away at her insides and forced their fat tongues past her teeth and so filled her with their hot seed that it leaks like sea-salt pus from between her bloodied thighs, they slosh away through the mud and leave her; not for dead, not for anything but discarded, done with. For a long time, she lies still and watches the sky roiling above the alley, and the pain seems very, very far away, and the red clouds seem so close that if she raises her hand she might touch them, might break their blister-thin skins and feel the oily black rain hiding inside. Gazing up from the pit into the firelight her own Papa stokes so that the demons can walk the streets of Johnstown.

But the demons have kept their promises, and her throat is not sliced ear to ear, and she can still speak. She knows this because she hears the animal sounds coming from her mouth, distant as the pain between her legs. She is not dead, even if she is no longer alive.

"Tell us about the rusalka, Mama," her sister had said, and her mother had frowned, looking down at hands folded on her lap like broken wings.

"*Nem*, Emilia," her mother had answered firmly, gently, "Rusalka is not a good story for bedtime."

While her sister pleaded, Magda had sat straight-backed on the edge of the bed, silent, watching the window, watching the red and starless sky, and already that had been two weeks after the men with the buckboard and the white mare had brought her home, two weeks after her mother had cried and washed away the dirt and blood, the clinging semen. Two weeks since her father had stormed down from Prospect Hill with his deer rifle and had spent a night in jail, had been reminded by the grave-jowled constable that they were, after all, Hungarians, and what with all the talk of the Company taking on bohunk contract workers, cheap labor depriving honest men with families of decent wages, well, it wouldn't do to look for more trouble, would it? In the end, he'd said, it would have been the girl's word against anyone he might have brought in, anyway.

In that space of time, days stacked like broken dishes, not a word from Magda and no tears from her dark and empty eyes. When food was pressed to her lips, a spoonful of soup or gulyás, she'd eaten, and when the sun went down and the lamps were put out, she'd lain with her eyes open, staring through the window at the seething sky.

"Please, Mama, *kérem*," her sister had whined, whined and Magda turned then, had turned on them so furiously that a slat cracked gunshot-loud beneath the feather mattress. Startled Emilia had cried out, reaching for their mother. And Magda had pulled herself towards them, hands gone to claws, tetanus snarl and teeth bared like a starving dog. And all that furnace glow gathered, hoarded from the red nights, and spilling from her eyes.

"Magda, *stop this*," her mother said, pulling Emilia to her. "You're frightening your sister! You're frightening me!"

"No, Mama. She wants to hear a story about the rusalka, then I will *tell* her about the rusalka. I will *show* her about the rusalka."

But her mother had stumbled to her feet, too-big Emilia clutched awkwardly in her arms, and the wobbly chair tumbled over and kicked aside. Backing away from the sagging bed and Magda, burning Magda, Emilia's face hidden against her chest. Backing into the shadows crouched in the doorway.

"She wants to hear, Mama, she *wants* to hear my story."

Her mother had stepped backward into the hall gloom, had slammed the bedroom door shut behind her, and Magda had heard the key rattle in the lock, bone rattle, death rattle, and then she'd been alone. The oil lamp

still bright on the wobbly table, and a train had wailed, passing down in the valley, and when the engineer's whistle and the rattle and throb of boxcars had faded away, there had been only her mother's sobs from the other side of the door and the distant clamor of the mills.

Magda had let the lamp burn, staring a while into its tiny flame haloed safe behind blackened chimney glass, and then she'd turned back to the window, the world outside framed safe within. She'd held fingers to her mouth, and, between them, whispered her story to the sympathetic night.

All the lost and pretty suicides, all the girls in deep lakes and swirling rivers, still ponds, drowned or murdered and their bodies secreted in fish-silvered palaces. Souls committed to water instead of consecrated earth, and see her on Holy Thursday, on the flat rocks combing out her long hair, grown green and tangled with algae and eels? See her sitting in the low branches of this willow, bare legs hanging like pale fruit, toes drawing ripples in the stream, and be kind enough this sixth week past Easter to leave a scrap of linen, a patch or rag. Come back, stepping quietly through the tall grass, to find it washed clean and laid to dry beneath the bright May sky.

And there is more, after that, garlands for husbands and the sound of clapping hands from the fields, voices like ice melting, songs like the moment before a dropped stone strikes unseen well water.

Carry wormwood in your pockets, young man, and bathe with a cross around your neck.

Leave her wine and red eggs.

And when she dances under the summer moon, when the hay is tall and her sisters join hands, pray you keep yourself behind locked doors, or walk quickly past the waving wheat; stay on the road, watch your feet.

Or you'll wind up like poor Józef, remember Józef, Old Viktor's son? His lips were blue, grain woven into his hair, and how do you think his clothes got wet, so muddy, so far from the river?

And see her there, on the bank beneath the trees, her comb of stickly fish bones? Watch her, as she pulls the sharp teeth through her green hair, and watch the water rise.

Magda thought, *So, this is what it's like to drown, like stirring salt into water,* thinking as she drifted, dissolving just below the surface of the lake, sinking slowly into twilight the color of dead moss, the stones in her

pockets only a little help. Her hair floated, wreathing her face, and the last silver bubbles rose from her open mouth, hurrying away. Just the faintest dull pressure in her chest, behind her eyes, and a fleeting second's panic, and then there was a quiet more perfect than anything she'd ever imagined. Peace folding itself thick around her, driving back the numbing cold and the useless, coruscating sun filtering down from above, smothering doubt and fear and the crushing regret that had almost made her turn around, scramble back up the slippery bank when the water had closed like molasses around her ankles.

Magda flowed into the water, even as the water flowed into her, and by the time she reached the bottom, there was hardly any difference between them anymore.

2.

Thursday, the wet dregs of Memorial Day, and Mr. Tom Givens slipped quietly away from the talk and cigar smoke of the clubhouse front rooms. Talk of the parade down in Johnstown and the Grand Army Veterans and the Sons of Veterans, the amputees in their crutches and faded Union blues; twenty-four years past Appomattox, and Grant was dead, and Lee was dead, and those old men, marching clear from Main to Bedford Street despite the drizzling sky. He'd sat apart from the others, staring out across the darkening lake, the docks and the club fleet, the canoes and sailboats and Mr. Clarke's electric catamaran moored safe against the threat of a stormy night.

And then someone, maybe Mr. D. W. C. Bidwell, had brought up the matter of the girl, and faces, smoke-shrouded, brandy-flushed, had turned towards him, curious, and

Oh, yes, didn't you know? Why, Tom here saw her, saw the whole damnable affair…

and so he'd politely excused himself. Had left them mum bling before the crackle and glow of the big sandstone fireplace. By the time he'd reached the landing and the lush path of burgundy carpet that would carry him back to his room, the conversation had turned, inevitably, to iron and coke, the new Navy ironclads for which Carnegie, Phipps, and Co. had been contracted to produce the steel plating. Another triumph for Pittsburgh, another blow to the Chicago competition.

Now, Tom shut the door behind him, and so the only light was dim grey through the windows; for a moment, he stood in the dark before reaching for the lamp chain. Above the lake, the clouds were breaking apart, hints of stars and moonshine in the rifts. The lake almost glimmered, seeming to ripple and swirl out towards in the middle.

It's only wind on the water, Tom Givens told himself as he pulled the lamp chain hard and warm yellow drenched the room, drove the blackness outside, and he could see nothing in the windows except the room mirrored and himself, tall and very much in need of a shave. By the clock on his dresser, it was just past nine. *At least,* he thought, *maybe there'll be no storms tonight.* But the wind still battered itself against the clubhouse, and he sat down in a chair, back to the lake, and poured amber whiskey. He drank it quickly and quickly refilled the glass, trying not to hear the gusting wind, the shutter rattle, the brush of pine boughs like old women wringing their bony hands.

By ten, the bottle was empty, and Tom Givens was asleep in the chair, his stocking feet propped on the bed.

An hour later, the rain began.

The storm was as alive as anything else, as alive as the ancient shale and sandstone mountains and alive as the wind; as alive as the scorch and burn of the huge Bessemer converters and the slag-scabbed molten iron that rolled like God's own blood across the slippery steel floors of the Cambria mills. And also as perfectly mindless, as passion ately indifferent. It had been born somewhere over Nebraska two days before, had swept across the plains and in Kansas spawned twister children who danced along the winding Cottonwood River and wiped away roads and farms. It had seduced Arctic air spilling off the Great Lakes and sired blizzards across Michigan and Indiana, had spoken its throaty poetry of gale and thunder throughout the Ohio River Valley, and finally, with violent arms, would embrace the entire mid-Atlantic seaboard.

As Tom Givens had listened distractedly to the pomp and chatter of the gentlemen of the club, the storm had already claimed western Pennsylvania, had snubbed the sprawling scar of Pittsburgh for greener lovers farther east. As he'd slept, it had stroked bare ridges and stream-threaded valleys, rain-shrouding Blairsville and Bolivar, New Florence and Ninevah, had

followed the snaky railroad through Conemaugh Gap into the deep and weathered folds of Sang Hollow.

And then, Johnstown, with its patchwork cluster of boroughs crowded into the dark hole carved in the confluence of two rivers. The seething Cambria yards and the office buildings, the fine and handsome homes along Main Street. The storm drummed tin- and slate-shingled roofs, played for the handful of mill workers and miners drinking late inside California Tom's, for the whores in Lizzie Thompson's sporting house on Frankstown Hill. George and Mathilde Heiser, closing up for the night, paused in the mercantile clutter of their store to watch the downpour, and inside St. Joseph's parsonage, Reverend Chapman, who'd been having bad dreams lately, was awakened by his wife, Agnes, and they lay together and listened to the rain pounding Franklin Street.

Unsatisfied, insatiable, the storm had continued east, engulfing the narrow valley, Mineral Point and the high arch of the Pennsylvania Railroad viaduct, and, at last, sleeping South Fork.

As alive as anything it touched.

The girl on the dam doesn't know that he's watching, of that much he's certain. He sits by open windows, and the early morning air smells like the lake, like fish and mud, and something sharper. He's been drunk more than he's been sober since the night down in Johnstown, the night he sat in the balcony of the Washington Street Opera House, *Zozo the Magic Queen* on stage, and some other fellows from the club talking amongst themselves more than watching the actors.

The girl from the dam is walking on the water.

He leans forward, head and shoulders out the window because he can't hear, Irwin braying like a goddamned mule from the seat behind, and he can't hear the words, the players' lines, can only hear Irwin repeating the idiotic joke over and over again. Beneath the window of his room, the audience is seated, and he stares down at men's heads and the ladies' feathered hats, row after row on the front lawn of the South Fork Hunting and Fishing Club.

The storm still somewhere far away, but rushing like locomotive wheels, like thunder, like applause and laughter, and the footlights are like light ning frozen on her face.

“Ask Tom,” the usher says. “Tom saw the whole damnable affair,” and Irwin howls.

And then the girl’s gone, if she were ever really there, and the crowd is on its feet, flesh smacking flesh in frenzied approval; if she were ever there. Lake Conemaugh is as smooth as varnished wood, and he knows it’s all done with trapdoors and mirrors, and that, in a moment, she’ll rise straight up from the stage planks to take her bows. But the roses fall on the flat water and lie undisturbed, and now the curtains are sweeping closed, velvet the color of rain rippling across the sky.

“…saw the *whole* affair,” Irwin echoes, so funny he wants to say it over and over, and they’re all laughing, every one, when Tom gets up to go, when it’s obvious that the show’s over and everyone else is leaving their seats, the theater emptying onto the front porch of the clubhouse.

Sidewalk boards creak loudly beneath his shoes, thunk and mold-rotten creak; after the evening rain showers, the air smells cleaner at least, coal dust and factory soot washed from the angry industrial sky into black gutters, but the low clouds hold in the blast-furnace glow from Cambria City and so the sky is bloodier than ever.

Spring buggies and lacquered wagon wheels, satin skirts and petticoats held above the muddy street. The pungent musk of wet horse.

And he knows that he’s only stepped out of his room, that he stands in the second floor hall, that if he walks straight on he’ll pass three rooms, three numbered doors, and come to the stairs, the oak banister, winding downward. But it’s dark, the sputtering white-arc streetlights not reaching this narrow slit of inverted alley spine between Washington and Union streets. The carpet feels more like muck and gravel, and he turns, *starts* to turn, when thunder rumbles like animal whispers and cloth tearing and

Why, Tom here saw her. Saw the whole damnable affair.

the shadow things are hunched here, claws and grunts and breath exhaled from snot-wet nostrils. She turns her head, hair mired in the filth and standing water, face minstrel-smudged, but eyes bright, and she *sees* him, and he knows she’s begging him to help, to stop this, to pull the shadows off her before there’s nothing left to save.

But a shaggy head rises ox slow from the space between her breasts, and these eyes are nothing but the red sky, molten pools of stupid hunger, and Tom turns away, lost for a moment, feeling his way along the silken-papered walls, until his fumbling hands find the cool brass doorknob and

the thunder splits apart that world. Splits the alley girl like an overripe peach, and he steps across the threshold, his bare feet sinking through the floor into the icy lake, and she's waiting, dead hand shackle tight around his ankle to pull him down into the fish slime and silting night.

Mr. Tom Givens woke up, sweat-soaked, eyes wide, still seeing white-knuckled hands clasped, sucking air in shuddering gulps, air that seemed as thick, as unbreatheable, as dark lake water. The crystal-cut whiskey glass tumbled from his hands and rolled away beneath the bed. Thunder rumbled across the Allegheny night like artillery fire and Old Testament judg ment.

Both his legs were still propped up on the four poster and, as he shifted, the Charley horse began slowly, jealously, to relax its grip, and he realized there was no feeling at all in his left leg. Outside, furious rain pounded the windows and slammed the shutters against the clubhouse wall. Tom Givens cursed his stupidity, nodding off in the chair like a lousy drunkard, and he carefully lowered his tortured legs onto the floor. Fresh pain in bright and nauseating waves as the blood rushed back into droughty capillaries; the room swam, losing its precious substance for a moment, and the dream, still so close, lingered like crows around the grey borders.

A flash of lightning then, blinding sizzle that eclipsed the electric lamp, and the thunder clamored eager on its heels.

He sat in the chair, waiting for the last of the pin-and-needle stab to fade, and he listened to the storm. A wild night on the mountain, and that went a long way towards explaining the nightmare, that and the bourbon, that and the things he'd seen since he'd arrived at the lake two weeks before. He'd come out early, before the June crowds, hoping for rest and a little time to recover from the smoky bustle of Pittsburgh.

The loose shutters banged and rattled like the wind knocking to come inside, and he got up, cautious, legs still uncertain, but only two steps, three, to the window. And even as he reached for the latch, then thumbed it back, even as he pushed against the driving rain – knowing full well that he'd be soaked before the task was done – he heard the roar. Not of thunder, not this time, but something else. Something new. There was immediate and stinging cold as the sashes were ripped from his hands, slammed back and glass panes shattered against the palsied shutters.

And through the darkness and the downpour he saw the white and whirling thing, impossibly vast, moving past the docks, dragging itself across the lake. Silvered clockwise, and the deafening roar and boom, and

Tom Givens forgot the broken windows, the frantic drapery flutter, the shutters, ignored the rain blowing in, soaking him through, drenching the room. He watched as the waterspout passed by, and the girl, the girl standing there, her long dark hair whipped in the gale, her body an alabaster slash in the black night. She raised her bare arms, worshipping, welcoming, granting the funnel passage. She turned, her white gown become a whirling echo of the thing, and her arms were opened to him now, and Tom recognized the face.

The face that had turned to him, helpless, pleading, in the Johnstown alleyway, but changed, eyes swollen with bottomless fury and something that might be triumph, if triumph could be regret. And he knew as well that this was also the girl that he'd watched drown herself off South Fork Dam barely a week back.

Her lips moved, but the wind snatched the words away.

And then lightning splashed the docks with noonday bril liance, and she was gone, nothing remaining but bobbing canoes and the waves, and the trees bending down almost to the ground.

He passed the night downstairs, hours sobering into headache and listening to the storm from the huge main living room. He sat on pebble-grained calfskin and paced the Arabian carpeted floors, thumbing nervously through the new Mark Twain novel someone had left, finished or merely forgotten, on an end table. Occasionally, he glanced at the windows, towards the docks and the lake. And already the sensible 19th-Century part of his mind had begun to convince itself that he'd only been dreaming, or near enough; drunk and dreaming.

Finally, others were awake and moving, pot and pan noise and cooking smells from the kitchen, and the warm scents of coffee and bacon were enough to settle the argument; rational breakfast, a perfect syllogism against the fading night. He smoothed his hair, straightened his rumpled shirt and vest with hands that had almost stopped shaking and rose to take his morning meal with the others.

Then young Mr. Parke, resident engineer, shaved and dressed as smartly as ever, came quickly down the stairs, walked quickly to the porch door and let in the dawn, light like bad milk and the sky out there hardly a shade lighter than the night had been. Something roared in the foggy distance.

John Parke stepped outside, and Tom Givens followed, knowing that he was certainly better off heading straight for the dining room, but finding himself shivering on the long porch, instead. Before them, the lawn was littered with branches and broken limbs, with unrecognizable debris, and the lake was rough and brown.

“It’s up a ways, isn’t it?” Tom asked and his voice seemed magnified in the soppy air.

John Parke nodded slowly, contemplatively, then spoke without looking away from the water. “I’d say it’s up at least two feet since yesterday evening.”

“And that awful noise, what is that?”

Parke pointed southeast, towards the head of the lake, squinting as if by doing so he might actually see through the fog and drizzle.

“That awful noise, Mr. Givens, is most likely Muddy Run coming down to the lake from the mountains.” He paused, then added, “It must be a torrent after so much rain.”

“Doesn’t sound very good, does it? Do you think that the dam is, ah, I mean, do you…”

“Let’s see to our breakfasts, Mr. Givens,” John Parke said, offering up a weak smile, a pale attempt at reassurance, “and then I’ll see to the lake.”

The door clanged shut, and he was alone on the porch, rubbing his hands together against the gnawing damp and chill. After breakfast, he would go upstairs and pack his bags, find a carriage into South Fork; from there, he could take the 9:15 back to Pittsburgh. More likely than not, there would be others leaving, and it would be enough to say he was sick of the weather, sick of this dismal excuse for a holiday.

Whatever else, that much certainly was true.

Tom Givens turned his back on the lake, on the mess the night had made of the club grounds, and as he reached for the door, he heard what might have been laughter or glass breaking or just the wind whistling across the water. Behind him, one loud and sudden splash, something heavy off the docks, but he kept his eyes on the dark walnut wood grain, gripped the brass handle, and pulled himself inside once more.

A week drowned, and what was left of her, of her body, bloated flesh sponge like strawberry bruise and the whitest cheese, pocked by nibbling, hungry black-bass mouths, this much lay knitted into the pine-log tangle

and underbrush jamming the big iron fish screens. The screens that strained the water, that kept the lake's expensive stock inside (one dollar apiece, the fathers and grandfathers of these fish, shipped all the way from Lake Erie by special railroad car). Screens that now sieved the cream-and-coffee brown soup of the lake before it surged, six feet deep, through the spillway. The caretaker and his Italians, the sewer diggers with their shovels and pickaxes, watched as the lake rose and ate away the mounds of dirt they'd spent all morning heaping along the breast of the dam.

Blackened holes that were her eyes, grub-clogged sockets haloed in naked bone and meaty tatter, cribs for the blind and newborn maggots of water beetles and dragonflies.

Some minutes past grey noon, the lake spread itself into a wide and glassy sheet and flowed over the top, beginning to slice and carve, bit by bit, sand and clay and stone washed free and tumbling down the other side. And now the morning's load of cautious suggestions, desperate considerations and shaken heads, gambles passed on, the things that might have been done, none of it mattered. The workmen and the bystanders huddled, the dutiful and the merely curious, all rain-drenched, on either hillside, bookends for a deluge.

Tom Givens sat alone, safe and almost drunk again within the shelter of the South Fork depot, sipping Scotch whiskey from his silver flask and trying not to watch the nervous faces, not to overhear the hushed exchanges between the ticket agent and the yardmaster. During the night, almost a quarter mile of track had washed out between South Fork and Johnstown, and so there had been no train to Pittsburgh or anywhere else that morning. By afternoon, the tracks were backed up; the Chicago Limited stretched across Lamb's Bridge like a rusty, fat copperhead, and a big freight from Derry, too common for names, steamed and idled rain-slick and sullen just outside the station.

Tom had come from the club in Bidwell's springboard, but had lost track of Bidwell around noon, shortly after John Parke rode down from the dam. Soaked through to the skin, quite a sorry sight, really, drowned rat of a man galloping in on a borrowed chestnut filly. Parke had gathered a small crowd outside Stineman's supply store, had warned that there was water flowing across the dam, that, in fact, there was real danger of the dam giving way at any time.

Bidwell had snorted, the practiced porcine snort of authority and money, had immediately busied himself contradicting the dripping engineer, assuring everyone who'd listen (and everyone listens to the imperious cut of those clothes, the calm voice that holds itself in such high esteem) that there was nothing for them to get excited about. Mr. Parke had shrugged, his duty done, knowing better than to argue. He'd sent two men across the street to wire Johnstown from the depot's telegraph tower, had climbed back onto the mud-spattered horse, and then he'd gone, clopping back up the slippery road towards the lake.

Tom Givens' ass ached from the bench, that torturous church-pew excuse for comfort, and the rain was coming down hard again, hammering at the tin roof. He closed his eyes and thought briefly about dozing off, opened them again and checked his watch, instead; twenty minutes past three, nearly three hours spent sitting here, waiting. He snapped the watch shut and slipped it back into his vest pocket. He knew that the sensible thing to do was return to the club, return to its amenities and cloister, and he also knew that he'd sooner spend the night sleeping on this bench.

When he stood, his knees popped almost loud as firecrackers. The yardmaster was yelling to someone out on the platform; the ticket agent looked up from his paper and offered a strained and weary smile. Tom Givens nodded and walked slowly across the room, pausing to warm his hands at the squat pot-bellied stove before turning to stare out rain-streaked windows. Across the tracks, Railroad Street, its tidy row of storefronts, the planing mill and the station's coal tipple; farther along, the Little Conemaugh and South Fork Creek twined in a yellow-brown ribbon swallowing the flats below the depot, already claiming the ground floors of several houses out there. Along the banks, oyster-barked aspens writhed and whipped in the wind and current.

There were people in the street, men and women standing about like simple idiots in the downpour, shouting, some running, but not back indoors.

And then heard it, the rumbling thunder growl past thunder, past even the terrible whirl and roar from his waterspout nightmare. The earth trembled earth beneath his feet, the floorboards and walls and window panes of the depot resonating with sympathetic tremors.

Run, Thomas, run away.

One, two quickened heartbeats, and it rolled into view, very close, fifty feet high and filling in the valley from side to side, an advancing mountain of foam and churning rubbish. Every stump and living tree and fence post between the town and the dam, ripped free, oak and birch and pinewood teeth set in soil-frothy mad-dog gums, chewing up the world as it came.

Run, Thomas, run fast. She's coming.

But there was no looking away, even as he heard footsteps and someone grabbed him and tugged roughly at his shoulder, even as he pissed himself and felt the warmth spreading at his crotch. He caught a fleeting glimpse of a barn roof thrown high on the crest before it toppled over and was crushed to splinters underneath.

Too late. She's here, Tom. She's here.

And then Lake Conemaugh and everything it had gathered in its rush down to South Fork slammed into the town, and in the last moment before the waters reached Railroad Street and the depot, Tom Givens shut his eyes.

Beneath the red sky, he has no precise memory of the long walk down to this particular hell, slippery cantos blurred with shock and wet, does not even remember walking out onto the bridge. There's only the dimmest recollection of lying on the depot floor, face down on window shards as the building pitched and yawed, moored by telegraph-cable stitches; window shards and the live coals spilling from the fallen stove – steaming, sizzling in the dirty water, a grey-black soot shower from the dangling pendulum stove pipe; dimmer memories of the pell-mell stumble through the pitchy dark, leaf-dripping, hemlock slap and claw of needled branches, and at some point his left arm has stopped hurting, and hangs useless and numb at his side; he recalls fall ing again and falling again, and unseen dogs howling like paid mourners. A nigger boy, sobbing and naked and painted with blood the sticky-slick color of melted tar, the two of them staring down together at the scrubbed raw gash where Mineral Point should have been,

"Where is it?, asked Tom Givens. "Tell me where it's gone."

"Mister," the nigger boy replied, "the water just came and washed it right off to perdition."

and his eyes followed the boy's finger and howling dogs like mourners and

"Mister, your arm is broke, ain't it? Sure looks broke to me."

There is nothing else, simply nothing more Tom Givens can remember. Above him the sky is furnace red, and he sits alone on the bridge. Sandstone and mortar arches clogged with the shattered bones of the newly dead, South Fork and Mineral Point, Woodvale and Franklin, Johnstown proper, the flood's jumbled vomit piled higher than the bridge itself. Boxcars and trees, hundreds of houses swept neatly off foundations and jammed together here, telegraph poles and furniture. Impossible miles of glinting barbed wire from the demolished Gautier wireworks, vicious garland strung with the corpses of cows and horses and human beings.

And the cries of the living trapped inside.

And everything burns.

Tar-black roil, oily exhalation from the flames, breathed crackling into the sky, choking breath that reeks of wood smoke and frying flesh. Embers spiral up into the night, scalding orange and yellow white, and vanish overhead, spreading the fire like sparkling demon seeds.

Around him, men and women move, bodies bend and strain to wrestle the dead and dying and the barely bruised from the wreckage. And if anyone notices that he makes no move to help, no one stops to ask why.

From somewhere deep inside the pyre, comes the hoarse groan of steel, lumber creak, wood and metal folded into a single shearing animal cry, a rising ululation, and the wreckage shudders, shivering in its fevered dreams; and for this they stop, for *this* they spare fearful seconds and stare into the fuming night, afraid of what they'll see, that there might still be something worse left, held back for climax, for emphasis. But the stifling wind carries it away, muffles any chance of echo, and once again there are only the hurting sounds and the burning sounds.

And he is the only one who sees her, the only one still watching, as she walks between the jutting timbers, steps across flaming pools of kerosene-scummed water. One moment, lost inside the smoke, and then she steps clear again. Her hair dances in the shimmering heat and her white gown is scorched and torn, hanging from her in linen tatters. And the stain blooming at her crotch, rust-brown carnation unfolding itself, blood-rich petals, blood shiny on the palms of the hands she holds out to him.

Dead eyes flecked with fire and dead lips that move, shaping soundless words, and *Oh, yes, didn't you know? Why, Tom here saw her,* and what isn't there for him to hear is plain enough to see. She spreads her arms, and in another moment she's gone, and there is only the blazing rubbish.

…saw the whole damnable affair.

He fights the clutching grip of their hands, hands pulling him roughly back from the edge, hands grown as hard as the iron and coke they've turned for five or ten or fifteen years, forcing him down onto the smooth and corpse-cold stones, pinning him, helpless, to the bridge.

Above him, the sky is red and filled with cinders that sail and twinkle and finally fall like stars.

If there were such a thing as ghosts, the night was full of them.
David McCullough, *The Johnstown Flood* (1987)

To This Water

This is the first of my stories to appear in a hardback book, so it meant a lot to me. Thank you, Steve and David. That said, like "Emptiness Spoke Eloquent," it's a good example of an immature author having more ambition than sense. Written in Athens, during a hurricane.

Tears Seven Times Salt

Jenny Haniver sits with herself on the always damp mattress in the center of her concrete floor, damp cotton ticking mildewed dark, and no light comes through the matte-black painted windows of the basement apartment. Her books are scattered around her like paper bricks, warped covers and swollen pages. And the candlelight flicker and fluorescence steady from the dozens of aquariums bubbling contentedly, rheumy, omnipresent whisper of air through charcoal and peat and lavalit. She knows the words by heart, sacred interplay of Latin and English, holy pictures of scales and skin flayed back, ink glistening muscles and organs open across her lap.

If this knowledge were enough, she'd have gone down to them a long, long time ago.

Jenny's fingers follow the familiar, comforting lines, and her lips move, pronouncing soundlessly, bead counting each razor thin flare of cartilage and needle stab of bone, hyomandibular, interoperculum, supraoccipital crest.

Necessary, but utterly insufficient; dead end to salvation or evolution, transcendence, and when she finishes, Jenny closes the big book and sets it aside.

The apartment is too small, and her tanks line every inch of shelved wall; her long and cluttered tables, stolen doors laid across crumbling cinder blocks, taking up whatever space is left, uneven surfaces crowded with formalin-cloudy jars and wax-bottomed dissection trays, rusted pins and scalpels. The dumpster-scrounged mattress at the center and her at its soggy heart. She opens her eyes, irises the color of kelp, slick hazel brown and dead-star pupils eating the tiny pool of yellow candlelight and the green-white flood wrapped around. The air stinks like everything wet, fish and fish shit, mold and algae and the fleshy grey mushrooms that grow unmolested everywhere.

When Jenny Haniver stands, rising up air-bubble slow from her careless lotus, some of the layered bandages on her long legs tear, gauze crust clinging to the jealous old mattress fabric, tearing at the useless scabs underneath. She ignores the pain, not even an inconvenience anymore, just a distant murmuring taunt of failure.

Rumors of rumors reach even into her basement, and tonight Jenny Haniver has come out to see if there's any truth between the lines. She comes here less and less often now, this cavern of steel and cement, a warehouse once, and the tainted Hudson sighing past outside so the air tastes safe enough. She wears a dingy black and silver body suit to hide the marks, the bandages, sips at salty tequila and watches the dancers, bodies writhing seagrass and eel tangled in the invisible current of sound, alternating mix of industrial clatter and goth's sultry slur. Grease-paint vampires and boys with bee-stung lips the color of live gillflesh, ravestench reek of sweat and smoke and the fainter, briny tang of spilled beer and cum.

"Jenny," the girl says, shouts softly over the music and sits down in the booth across from her. Jenny looks up from her drink and waits until she remembers the face, puts a name with the hair bleached white and eyebrows shaved and penciled back in place.

"Hello," she says. "Hello, Maria."

"No one ever sees you anymore," the girl says, leaning in closer to be heard, and the black-light strobes catch on the silver stud in her tongue, the single tiny ring in her lower lip. "Someone said they saw you up in Chelsea last month. Pedro, yeah, he said that."

Jenny nods, neither yes nor no, faintest smile showing her teeth, sharp and plaque-yellowed triangles, incisors and canines filed piranha perfect. She lets her eyes drift back down to her glass, and the girl keeps talking.

"Jamie and Glitch got a new band together," she says. "And Jamie's singing, mostly, but Christ, Jenny, you know she can't sing like you."

"I heard that Ariadne came back," Jenny tells her, and the girl says nothing for a long time, a stretched, uneasy space filled up with the grind and wail from the speakers, calculated pandemonium and the background rumble of human voices.

"Jesus, where the hell did you hear something like that? People don't come back from the tunnels. You get that low, and you don't come back."

Jenny Haniver doesn't argue, finishes her tequila and watches the dancers. The girl leans close again, and her breath smells like cloves and alcohol.

"I scored some X," she says. "You want to do some X with me, Jenny?"

“I have to go,” Jenny says and stands, notices a glistening, oily patch on the candy-apple naugahyde where she’s soaked through the bandages and the nylon body suit.

“Everyone misses you, Jenny. I’ll tell Glitch you said hi, okay?”

She doesn’t reply, turns quickly and leaves the girl without another word, pushes her way across the dance floor, moving between tattered lace and latex and hands that casually, desperately grope as she passes, that undertow of oblivion and need and at least a hundred different hungers.

Jenny Haniver’s father never raped her, never laid her open like a live grey oyster and planted grains of sand for pearls and psychosis; none of that trendy talk-show trauma, nothing so horrible that it would have to be coaxed to the surface with hypnosis and regression therapy.

He was a longshoreman, and her mother had left him when Jenny was still a baby, had left him alone with their child and his senile old mother with her Polish accent as thick as chowder. Sometimes, when he was drunk, he hit them, and when he was sober he sometimes said he was sorry.

Once, after a layoff or a fight with his foreman, he backhanded Jenny so hard that he knocked out a front tooth, just a baby tooth and already loose anyhow, but afterwards he cried, and they rode the Q train together all the way out to Coney Island, to the New York Aquarium. He held her up high, and Jenny pressed her face flat against the thick glass, eyes wide and drowning in the mossy light filtering down from above, unbelieving, as weightless groupers and barracuda and sharks like the sleekest nightmares cruised silently past.

After the club and the long February-cold walk back to her apartment, Jenny stands before the mirror in her tiny bathroom, unframed looking glass taller than her by a head, and the walls papered with bright prints torn from library books. Millias’ Ophelia and John Waterhouse’s Shalott, *The Green Abyss* and a dozen nameless Victorian sirens. She has stripped off the body-suit rag, has wound away most of the leaking bandages. They lie in a sticky, loose pile at her feet, stained unforgiving shades of infection and a few bloody smears.

The air is so cold that it moves slow and heavy like arctic water around her naked body, gelid thick and redolent with the meaty, sweet perfume of rot that seeps from the incisions that don’t heal, from the dark, red-rimmed

patches down her thighs and legs, her belly. The most recent splice, only two days old, has already faded, silverblue shimmer traded for a color like sandwich grease through a brown paper bag. She touches it, and the cycloid scales flake away like dandruff, drifting dead and useless to the floor.

Jenny Haniver closes her eyes until the disappointment and nausea pass, and there's nothing left but the drip of the faucets, the bubbling murmur of her fish tanks from the other room. This time she will not break the mirror, won't give herself up to the despair. Instead, she opens her eyes and stares back at the gaunt thing watching her, metallic glint of desperation in that face, Auschwitz thin, the jut and hollow of bones just beneath death-pale skin.

You can't win, she thinks. *I won't die locked in here.*

Jenny Haniver turns her back on the mirror, turns to the shower stall, no bathtub here, and she pushes aside the mildew-blackened plastic curtain. She has to use the wrench lying on the little shelf intended for soap or shampoo to turn on the water, and it comes out numbing cold. She stands under the spray until she's stopped shivering, until she can't feel anything but the distant pressure of the water pounding itself futilely against her immutable flesh.

When Jenny Haniver was a child, Old Mama talked to the pipes, leaned over sinks and tubs, the toilet and storm culverts, and spoke slowly and softly through the drains, microphones that would carry her raspy old woman's voice down into the bowels of the city, the city beneath the city. Jenny would sit and watch, listening, anxiously straining to hear the responses that her grandmother clearly heard.

"Why can't I ever hear anything?" Jenny finally asked one winter afternoon. After school, and she had been watching for almost an hour from the kitchen table as her grandmother had leaned, head and bony shoulders into the white sink, alternately placing an ear and then her lips against the drain. When she spoke, it almost seemed that she kissed the rust-stained rim of the hole.

Old Mama raised her head, impatient scowl, and Jenny knew she'd interrupted, was sorry, but afraid to say so. The late afternoon sunlight, dim through the dirty kitchen window, caught in the lines and creases of Old Mama's face, shadowing each wrinkle deeper, making her look even older

than she was. Eyes like gouges made by a pecking bird, dark and narrowed, regarding her impudent granddaughter.

“Not until you begin to bleed for the moon,” Old Mama said, and she grabbed roughly at the crotch of her shapeless blue house dress. She grimaced and showed her gums. Jenny wasn’t stupid; she knew about menstruation, knew that someday she would get her period, and that then she wouldn’t be a child anymore.

“But then you won’t have to wait for them talk to you, Jenny,” Old Mama went on, “because *then* they will smell you, will smell you ripe in the water from your bath or when you wash your hands or flush the toilet. Then they will come to take you *back*.”

Jenny was afraid, even though she knew that Old Mama wasn’t well, wasn’t right in the head, as her father sometimes said, drawing circles in the air around his ear.

“Back where?” she asked cautiously, not really wanting to know what Old Mama meant.

“Back down to the sewers, down there in the shit and dark where Old Papa found you.”

Jenny’s grandfather had worked under the streets, had told her stories about the alligators, and huge, blind sewer rats that never saw the sun, and the cats as big and strong as dogs that lived down there and fed on them. But he was dead, and he’d never said one word to her about having found her in the sewers.

“You were such a very ugly baby that even the fish people that live down there didn’t want you. They left you under a big manhole, and Old Papa found you, naked and smeared in shit, and he had such a soft heart and brought you home.”

Jenny opened her mouth, but she was suddenly too scared to say anything.

“Your Mama, *she* knew, Jenny. Yes, your Mama knew that you weren’t really her baby, and that’s why she went away.”

Old Mama laughed, then, dry cackle, and waggled one arthritis-crooked finger at Jenny.

“And don’t ask your Papa. He is too stupid and doesn’t know that his little girl is not a real little girl. If he knew, he would be so angry he would stick you back down there now, or he would kill you.”

And then she put her head into the sink again, and Jenny sat staring at Old Mama's skinny rump, still unable to speak, pinned between the cold, solid knot settling in her stomach and the hot salt sting of the tears gathering in her eyes. After a while, Old Mama got bored, or the fish people quit talking to her, and she went off to watch television, and left Jenny alone in the kitchen.

After the shower, after she dry-swallows two of the green cephalexin capsules – antibiotics she buys cheap on the street – and puts clean bandages on her legs, Jenny falls asleep on her stinking mattress.

And she dreams of Ariadne Moreau and the hanging room and taut wires that hold her, suspended high above the slippery floor. A hundred stainless-steel barbs pierce the blood-dabbed flesh of her outstretched arms, shoulders and breasts and upturned face. She has become a matchless crucifixion. Ariadne holds her steady and draws the scalpel blade along the inside of her thighs, first one and then the other, down the length of each dangling leg.

"The old hag should have gone to jail for telling a kid crazy shit like that," Ariadne says.

Jenny doesn't take her eyes off the point far above where all the wires converge, the mad gyre of foam and salt spray eating up the ceiling, counterclockwise seethe of lath and plaster and rafters that snap like the ribs of dying giants.

"People like that," Ariadne says, "make me sorry I don't believe in Hell."

And then she binds Jenny's ankles together with duct tape and begins to sew, sinks the needle in just above her right ankle, draws fine surgical silk through and across to the left. Closing the wounds, stitching away the scalpel's track and the hateful cleft of her legs.

Jenny Haniver follows Forty-Eighth Street westward, black wraparound shades against the late morning sun that shows itself for brief moments at a time, slipping in and out of the shale-grey clouds like a bashful, burning child. She walks with quick, determined steps, ignoring the sharp jolts of pain in her feet and legs that seem to rise from the sidewalk. She moves between and through the mindless jostle of shoulders and faces, avoids her reflection in the shop-front and office lobby panes of glass she

passes. The chilling Hudson wind rips at her shabby peacoat, flutters her long, snarled hair.

The way down to the tunnels, the gully between Tenth and Eleventh Avenues that Ariadne showed her months ago, has not moved and has not been sealed. From the edge of a garbage dumpster, Jenny climbs over the chain-link fence that the city has put up to keep the mole people out or in; she clings to the steel tapestry, the diamond-shaped spaces like gar scales in between, with bare, wind-gnawed fingers and the worn toes of her tennis shoes. There is a single strand of barbed wire along the top that gives her a moment's trouble, but the solution costs only a few drops of her blood and a ragged new tear in one of her coat sleeves.

Thirty feet down to the tracks, and she inches along the sheer granite walls, nothing but scraggly, winter-dry clumps of goldenrod and poison sumac for treacherous hand holds. Then she slips and drops the last eight feet to the gravel roadbed below, landing hard on her ass, heart pounding and blood in her mouth from a bitten tongue, table salt and pennies, but nothing broken.

In front and behind, the old railroad disappears into the rock, blasted away over a hundred years ago, and nothing comes through here anymore but the occasional freight train. She takes off her sunglasses, stuffs them into a coat pocket, and walks into the darkness on a welcoming carpet of clothing and shattered green Thunderbird bottles, empty crack vials, and discarded syringes.

Inside, the stench of urine and human feces is as thick, as complete, as the dark; Jenny gags, acid-bitter taste of bile, and hides her mouth and nose in the crook of one arm. She knows that there are people watching her, can feel the wary or stark terrified track of their eyes, and sometimes she can hear faint whispering from the side tunnels. Something whooshes past her left ear, and, with a loud, wet pop, a bottle smashes against the tunnel wall. She's peppered with glass shards and drops of soured wine or beer.

"Who *are* you?" a hoarse and sexless voice demands. "Who the *hell* are you?"

She does not answer, stands perfectly still and stares back at the gloom, feigned defiance, pretending that she's not afraid, that her heart's not thumping crazy in her chest and her mouth isn't gone dry as the gravel ballast underfoot.

Not another word from the dark, only the far-off growl of cars and trucks on the street above, and Jenny starts walking again, thankful for the company of her own footsteps.

There are iron grates set into the roof of the tunnel at irregular intervals, dazzling, checkerboard sunlight from the unsuspecting world overhead that only makes the blackness that much more absolute. She walks around, not through them, but keeps careful count of the blinding, gaudy pools in her head; one, three, five, and at the seventh, she turns left. The basket-handle arch of the side tunnel is faintly visible, dim reflection off the measured stagger of brickwork, and spray painted sloppy white above and across the chunky keystone – jesus saves and a tag like a preschooler's goldfish. Jenny looks over her shoulder once before she leaves the light behind and follows the gentle slope of the side tunnel west, down towards the river.

She learned to hear the voices in the pipes three years before her first period, hardly a month after her grandmother had told her about Old Papa finding her in the sewers.

Very late at night, when she was sure that everyone else was asleep – her father lost in his fitful dreams and Old Mama snoring like a jackhammer down the hall – Jenny would slip out of bed and tiptoe to the upstairs bathroom. She would bring a blanket because the tile floor and cast-iron tub were always freezing, and then lie for hours, curled fetal, with her ear pressed tight against the drain.

And at first there was nothing but a far-off ocean hum like conch shells and the sounds of the building's old copper plumbing clearing its hundred throats, the gurgle or glug of water on its way up from the mains or back down to the sewers. The metal-hammered clank of pipes expanding or contracting. Sometimes, she would doze and dream in the muted greens and browns of the big Coney Island aquarium, lazy sway of sea plants and anemone tendrils and the strange shadows that moved like storm clouds overhead.

And then, three nights before Christmas and a fresh blanket of snow like vanilla icing, she heard their voices, so faint at first that it might have been anything else, trapped air or her straining imagination. And Jenny lay very still, suddenly wide awake and every muscle tensed, hearing and not believing that she was hearing, not wanting to believe that she was hearing.

The softest, sibilant mumble, and gooseflesh washed prickling cold across her skin.

Not words, at least not words that she could understand, a muffled weave of hisses and clicks and velvet sighs that rose and fell in overlapping, breathy waves. Jenny fought the fear, that slick red thing twisting inside, and her pounding heart, the urge to pull away, to run wailing to her father and tell him *everything*, everything that Old Mama had said that day in the kitchen and everything since. The urge to turn the tap on scalding hot and drown whatever was down there.

The fish people who live down there.

But Jenny Haniver did not run. She squeezed her eyes shut and ignored everything but the wet voices. She lay with fists clenched and knees braced against the sides of the tub. Tried to wrestle something like meaning or sense from the gibbering. And afterwards, she would come back every night, would spend the house's dead hours listening patient and terrified until she began to understand.

The city beneath the city, accumulated labyrinth of pipe and tunnel extending skyscraper-deep beneath the asphalt and concrete Manhattan crust; sewer and rumbling subway and tens of thousands of miles of gas and steam and water mains. Electric and telephone cables like sizzling neurons buried in the city's flesh, copper dendrites wrapped safe inside neoprene and rubber and lead.

Jenny Haniver walks the anthill maze, walls of crumbling masonry and solid granite. She counts off each blind step, Ariadne's directions remembered like a combination lock's code; forty-five, then right, seventy-one, then left, deeper and deeper into the honeycombed earth beneath Hell's Kitchen. The air grows warmer by slow degrees, and the only sounds left are the nervous scritch and squeak of the rats, the faint drip and splash of water from the walls and ceilings as the musty air turns damp.

Her eyes do not adjust, register only the ever increasing absence of light, a thousand shades past pitch already; dark that can smother, that seeps up her nostrils and settles in her lungs like black pneumonia. She walks clumsy as a stumbling zombie, hands out Frankenstein-stiff in front of her, lifts her feet high to keep from tripping over garbage or stepping on a rat.

Fifty-seven, then right, and that's the last, and for all she knows she's lost, almost certain that she'll never be able to reverse the order and follow

the numbers backwards to the surface. And when she catches the dimmest shimmer up ahead, she believes it can only be panic, hallucination, a cruel will-o'-the-wisp tease dreamed up by the rods and cones of her light-starved eyes. But with every step the light seems to swell, becoming a faint bluish glow now, and she can almost make out the tunnel walls, her own white hands somewhere in front of her face.

There are new sounds, too, parchment-dry susurrance and the moist smack and slap of skin against mud. The air smells like shit, and the cold rot of long-neglected refrigerators. The tunnel widens, then, abruptly opening out into a small cavern, low walls caked thick with niter and a scum of luminescent fungus, and she can see well enough to make out the forms huddled inside. Skin bleached colorless by the constant dark, stretched much too tight over kite-frame skeletons, razor shoulders, xylophone ribs. Bodies naked to the chill and damp or clothes that hang in tatters like a shedding second skin.

Jenny follows the narrow path between them, and they watch her pass with empty, hungry eyes, shark eyes, grab at her calves and ankles in halfhearted frenzy, hands no more than blue-veined claws, arms no more than twigs.

Ariadne Moreau sits by herself on a crooked metal folding chair at the far end of the chamber, lion's mane nimbus of tangled black hair and necklaces of rat bone draped like beads around her neck. She wears nothing else but her tall leather boots and vinyl jacket, both scabby with dried mud and mildew. Her thighs, the backs of her bony hands, are splotched with weeping track marks, and she smiles, sickly weak approval or relief, as Jenny approaches.

"I knew that you'd come," she says, and her voice sighs out of her, a husky wheeze, and she extends one hand to Jenny, trembling fingers and nails chewed down to filthy nubs. "I never stopped believing that you'd come."

Jenny does not take her hand, hangs a few feet back.

"It isn't working," she says, and opens her peacoat, displays her own ruined flesh to prove the point. She's only wearing boxers underneath, and all the bandages are oozing, stains that look like sepia ink by the weird blue light of the cave. A few have come completely undone, revealing her clumsy sutures and the necrotic patchwork of grafts.

“I have to know if you’ve learned anything. If you’ve seen anything down here,” she says, and closes her coat again.

Ariadne’s smile fades, jerky, stop-motion dissolve, and she lets her arm drop limply again at her side. She laughs, an aching, broken sound, and shakes her shaggy head.

“*Anything*,” Jenny says again. “*Please*,” and she takes the baggie of white powder from her coat pocket, holds it out to Ariadne. Behind Jenny, the mole people whisper nervously among themselves.

“Fuck you, Jenny,” words spit softly out like melon seeds. “Fuck you, and fuck the voices in your sick fucking head.”

Jenny steps closer, sets the heroin gently on Ariadne’s bare knee. “I’m sorry,” she says. “I can’t stay.”

“Then at least let me kiss you, Jen,” and Ariadne’s arms strike like moray eels, locking firmly around Jenny’s neck and pull her roughly down. Ariadne’s mouth tastes like ashes and bad teeth, and her tongue probes quickly past the jagged reef of sharpened incisors. Jenny tries to pull away, pushes hard, and Ariadne bites the tip end of her tongue as their mouths part, bites hard, and Jenny stumbles backwards and almost falls among the restless mole people, the pain and the deceitful copper warmth of her own blood on her lips.

Ariadne laughs again, vicious, hopeless chuckle, wipes her mouth with the back of one hand and snatches the baggie of dope from her knee with the other.

“Get out of here, Jenny. Go back up there and slice yourself to fucking ribbons.”

Eyes that are all pupil now, and the dark smudge of Jenny’s blood on her chin.

Jenny Haniver runs back the way she came, dodging the forest of grasping hands that rises up around her.

In the dream, the dream that she’s had again and again since the first night she heard their voices, Jenny Haniver drifts weightless in silent hues of malachite and ocher green. The sun filters into and through the world from somewhere else above, Bible storybook shafts in the perfect, silting murk. She moves her long tail slowly from side to side and sinks deeper, spreads her silver arms wide, accepting and inviting. And he rises from below, from the cold, still depths where the sun never reaches, the viperfish

night, and folds her away in pelvic webs and stiletto spines. She gasps, and the salt water rushes into her throat through the crimson-feathered slits beneath her chin.

Jenny sinks her teeth, row after serrate row, into the tender meat of his shoulder, scrapes his smooth chest with the erect spurs of her nipples.

And the voices are all around, bathypelagic echoes, as tangible as the sweet taste of his blood in her mouth.

She has never felt this safe, has never felt half this whole.

Their bodies twine, a living braid of glimmering scales and iridescent scaleless flesh, and together they roll over and over and down, until the only light is the yellowish photophore glow of anglerfish lures and jellyfish veils.

She wakes up again, stiff crammed into the dank cubby hole, more blind than in the last moment before she opened her eyes. There's no sense of time anymore, only the vague certainty that she's been wandering the tunnels for what must be days and days and days now, and the burning pain in her mouth and throat, Ariadne's infection gift rotting its way into her skull. She is drowning, mind and body, in the tunnels' incessant night tide and the sour fluids that drain from her wounded tongue.

Jenny Haniver coughs, fishhook barbs gouging her chest and throat, and spits something thick and hot into the dark. She tries to stand, braces herself, unsteady arms and shoulders against the slick tunnel wall, but the knifing spasms in her feet and legs and the fever's vertigo force her to sit back down, quickly, before she falls.

The rats are still there, waiting with infinite carrion patience for her to die. She can hear their breath and the snick of their tiny claws on the stone floor. She doesn't know why they haven't taken her in her sleep; she no longer has a voice to shout at them, so kicks hard at the soft, flea-seething bodies when they come too close.

Because she cannot walk, she crawls.

Here, past the merciful failure of punky concrete and steel-rod reinforcements, where one forgotten tunnel has collapsed, tumbled into the void of one much older, she lies at the bottom of the wide rubble scree. Face down in the commingled cement debris and shattered work of Colonial stonemasons, and the sluggish river of waste and filth-glazed water moves

along inches from her face. The rats and the muttering ghosts of Old Mama and Old Papa and her father will not follow her down; they wait like a jury, like ribsy vultures, like the living (which they are not) keeping deathbed vigil.

There is wavering yellow-green light beneath the water, the gaudy drab light of things which will never see the sun and have learned to make their own. So much light that it hurts her eyes, and she has to squint. The ancient sewer vibrates with their voices, their siren songs of clicks and trills and throaty bellows, but she can't answer, her ruined tongue so swollen that she can hardly even close her mouth or draw breath around it. Instead, she splashes weakly with the fingers of one straining, outstretched hand, smacking the surface with her palm.

Old Mama laughs again, and then her father and Old Papa try to call her back, and they promise her things she never had and never wanted. This only makes Old Mama laugh louder. Jenny ignores them, watches the long and sinuous shadows that move lazily across the vaulted ceiling. Something big brushes her fingertips, silky roughness and fins like lace, unimaginable strength in the lateral flex of those muscles, and she wants to cry but the fever scorch has sealed her tear ducts.

With both hands, she digs deep into the froth and sludge that mark the boundary between worlds, stone and water, and pulls herself the last few feet. Dragging her useless legs behind her, Jenny Haniver slides into the pisswarm river, and lets the familiar currents carry her down to the sea.

O that this too too solid flesh would melt…

William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

Tears Seven Times Salt

A dry run for so very many stories since, my fevered punk-rock retelling of "The Little Mermaid." You'll see that, I think. Also, my first Manhattan story, because once in the subways I couldn't stop thinking about what lay *below* the subways.

Breakfast in the House of the Rising Sun

(Murder Ballad No. 1)

Out here on the tattered north rim of the Quarter, past sensible bricks to keep the living out and the dead inside, weathered-marble glimpses above the wall of St. Louis #1, and on past planned Iberville squalor and Our Lady of Guadalupe. Hours left till dawn, and the tall man in his long car turns another corner and glides down Burgundy. Almost dreaming, it's been too long since he slept or ate, so long since he left Matamoros and the long Texas day before of sun and gulf-blind blue. All that fucking coke sewn up in the seats, white blocks snug in plastic wrap beneath his numb ass, and he checks the Lincoln's rear-view mirror, watching, watching in case some Big Easy pig doesn't like his looks. The fat veins in his eyes are almost the same shade of red as the little crimson pills that keep him awake, keep him moving. But there isn't much of anything back there – silhouette and streetlight shadow of a crazy old black man in the street, and he's pointing up at the sky and falls to his knees on the asphalt, but he's nothing for Jimmy DeSade to worry about. He lights another Camel, breathes grey smoke, and there's the House, just like every time before. Gaudy Victorian ruin, grotesquerie of sagging shutters and missing gingerbread shingles, the slow rot of time and Louisiana damp. Maybe it's leaning into itself a little more than last time, and maybe there are a couple of new dog or gator skulls dangling in the big magnolia standing guard out front. Hard to tell in the dark, no streetlights here, no sodium-arc revelation, and every downstairs window painted black as mourning whores. Jimmy DeSade drives on by, checks his mirror one more time, and circles around to the alley.

Rabbit opens his door a crack and watches the trick stagger away down the long hall, the fat man that stank like garlic and aftershave, fat man that tied Rabbit's hands behind his back and bent him over the bed, pulled down his lacy panties and whacked his butt with a wooden hairbrush until he pretended to cry. Until he screamed stop, Daddy, stop, I'll be a good little girl now. They still give him the creeps worst of all, the call-me-Daddy

men. Rabbit eases the door shut again, whispering half a prayer there will be no more tonight, no more appetite and huffing desperation, and maybe he can have a little time alone before he fixes and falls asleep.

Let's not count on it, he thinks and kicks off the black patent pumps, walks the familiar five steps back to the low stool in front of his dressing table, sits down and stares at himself in the mirror. Every minute of twenty-two years showing in his face tonight – and then some – a handful of hard age shining out mean from beneath powder and mascara smears. Rabbit finds his lighter, finds the stingy, skinny joint Arlo slipped him earlier in the evening, and the smoke doesn't make it easier to face that reflection; the smoke makes it remotely possible. He pulls a scratchy tissue from the box, something cheap that comes apart in cold cream, and wipes away the magenta ghost of his lipstick, sucks another hit from the joint and holds the smoke until his ears begin to buzz, high electric sound like angry wasps or power lines, then breathes it out slow through his nostrils. And those grey-blue eyes squint sharply back at him through the haze – Dresden blue, his Momma used to say – pretty Dresden blue eyes a girl should have, and Rabbit licks thumb and forefinger, pinches out the fire and stashes the rest of the joint for later. Tucks it safely beneath one corner of a jewelry box; later he'll need it more than he needs it now.

Rabbit restores the perfect bee-stung pout, Cupid's-bow artifice, a clockwise twist and the lipstick stub pulls back inside its metal foreskin. No point in bothering with the eyes again this late, but he straightens his dress, Puritan-simple black as if in apology for all the rest. He also straightens the simpler strand of pearls at his throat, iridescent plastic to fool no one lying against his milk-in-coffee skin, skin not black, not white, and there he is like a parody of someone's misconception of the mulatto whores of Old New Orleans. Bad romance, but *this* is real, this room that smells like the moldy plaster walls and the john's cum drying on the sheets, cheap perfume and the ghosts of tobacco and marijuana smoke.

This is as real as it gets, and you can sell the rest of that shit to the tourists with their goose-necked hurricane glasses, Mardi Gras beads, "Red Beans and Anne Rice" T-shirts, and pennies for the tap-dancing nigger boys with Pepsi caps on the soles of their shoes. Rabbit closes his eyes and makes room in his head for nothing but the sweet kiss of the needle, as if anticipation alone could be rush, and he doesn't move until someone knocks at the bedroom door.

Arlo works downstairs behind the bar, and he sweeps the floors and mops the floors, scrubs away the blood or puke and whatever else needs scrubbing away. He sees that the boys upstairs have whatever keeps them going, a baggie of this or that, a word of kindness or a handful of pills. Sees that the big motherfuckers downstairs at the tables have their drink. He empties ashtrays, takes away empty bottles, and washes whiskey glasses. Arlo isn't even his name. His real name is Etienne, Etienne Duchamp, but no one likes that Cajun shit up here, and one time some mouthy, drunk bitch said his hair made him look like some old folk singer, some hippie fuck from the sixties. *You know, man, Alice's Restaurant,* and *you can get anythang you waaaaaant…* and it stuck. Good as anything else in here, he supposes, and in here beats selling rock in the projects, watching for gang bangers and cops that haven't been paid or conveniently might not remember they've been paid.

Arlo pulls another beer from the tap and sets it on the bar, sweaty glass on the dark and punished wood, reaches behind him for the piss-yellow bottle of Cuervo, and pours a double shot for the tall man across the bar. The man just passing through on his way back to New Jersey, the man with the delivery from Mexico City, the man whose eyes never come out from behind his shades. The man who looks sort of like a biker, but drives that rusty-guts land-yacht Lincoln. Jimmy DeSade (*Mr.* DeSade to Arlo and just about anyone else who wants to keep his teeth, who wants to keep his fucking balls), so pale he looks like something pulled out of the river after a good long float, his face so sharp, and lank blue-black hair growing out of his skull.

"Busy night, Arlo?" he asks, icicle voice and accent that might be English and might be fake, and Arlo shrugs and nods.

"Always busy 'round here, Mr. DeSade. Twenty-four seven, three hundred and sixty-five." And Jimmy DeSade doesn't smile or laugh, just slowly nods his head and sips at the tequila.

Then a fat man comes shambling down the crimson-carpeted stairs opposite the bar, the man that's had Rabbit from midnight till now, and Arlo sees right off that the man's fly's open, yellowed-cotton wrinkle peek-a-boo careless between zipper jaws. Stupid fat fuck, little eyes like stale venom almost lost in his shiny pink face. And Arlo thinks maybe he'll check in on Rabbit, just a quick *You okay? You gonna* be *okay?* before the two o'clock

client. He knows the fat man wouldn't have dared do anything as stupid as put a mark on one of Jo Franklin's mollies, nothing so honest or suicidal, so not that kind of concern. But this man moves like a bad place locked up in skin and Vitalis, and when he hustles over to the bar, ham-hock knuckles, sausage fingers spread out against the wood, Arlo smells sweat and his sour breath and the very faint hint of Rabbit's vanilla perfume – Rabbit's perfume, like something trapped.

"Beer," grunts the fat man, and Arlo takes down a clean mug. "No, not that watered-down shit, boy. Give me a *real* beer, in a goddamned bottle."

Not a word from Jimmy DeSade, and maybe he's staring straight at the fat man, staring holes, and maybe he's looking somewhere past him, up the stairs; there's no way to know which from this side of those black sunglasses, and he sips his tequila.

"Jo knows that I'm waiting," Jimmy DeSade says, doesn't ask, not really, the words rumbling out between his thin lips, voice so deep and cold you can't hear the bottom. Arlo says yes sir, he knows, he'll be out directly, but Arlo's mostly thinking about the smell of Rabbit leaking off the fat man, and he knows better, knows there's nothing for him in this worry but the knot winding tight in his guts, this worry past his duty to Jo, past his job.

The fat man swallows half the dewy bottle in one gulp, wet and fleshy sound as the faint lump where his Adam's apple might be rises and falls, rises and falls. He swipes the back of one hand across his mouth, and now there's a dingy grin, crooked little teeth in there like antique cribbage pegs. "Jesus, sweet baby Jesus," he says. "That boy-child is as sweet a piece of ass as I've ever had." And then he half turns, his big head swiveling necklessly round on its shoulders, to look directly at Jimmy DeSade. "Mister, if you came lookin' for a sweet piece of boy ass, well, you came to the right goddamn place. Yessiree."

Jimmy DeSade doesn't say a word, mute black-leather gargoyle still staring at whatever the hell the eyes behind those shades are seeing, and the fat man shakes his head, talking again before Arlo can stop him. "That's the God's honest fucking truth," he says. "Tight as the lid on a new jar of cucumber pickles – "

"You done settled up with Rabbit? You square for the night?" Arlo asks quickly, the query injected like a vaccination, and the fat man grows suddenly suspicious, half-offended.

“Have I ever tried to stiff Jo on a fuck? The little faggot’s got the money. You think I look like the sort’a cheap son of a bitch that’d try to steal a piece of ass? *Shit,*” and Arlo’s hands go out defensively, then. *No, man, that’s cool, just askin’, that’s all, just askin’.* The fat man drains the beer bottle, and Arlo has already popped the cap off another. “On the house,” he says.

Behind them, the felted tables, and one of the men lays down a double-six (no cards or dice, dominoes only in Jo Franklin’s place, and that’s not tradition, that’s the rule), and he crows triumphantly, is answered with a soft ring of grumbled irritation round the spread of wooden rectangles the color of old ivory, lost money and the black dots end-to-end like something for a witch to read.

His hair not grey, cotton-boll white, and, even by the soft Tiffany light of his office, JoJo Franklin looks a lot older than he is, the years that the particulars of his life have stolen and will never give back. He closes a ledger and takes off his spectacles, rubs at the wrinkled flesh around his eyes. Rows of numbers, fountain-pen sums scrawled in his own unsteady left hand because he’s never trusted anyone else with his books. He blinks, and the room stays somewhere just the other side of focused: dull impression of the velvet-papered, wine-red walls, old furnishings fine and worn more threadbare than himself, the exquisitely framed forgery of Albert Matignon’s *Morphine* that a Belgian homosexual had tried to pass off as genuine. He paid what the man asked, full in the knowledge of the deceit, small talk and pretended gratitude for such a generous price, then had the Belgian killed before he could cash the check; Jo forgot the man’s name a long time ago, but he kept the phony Matignon, the three beautiful morphinomanes, decadent truth beneath Victorian delusions of chastity, and this fraud another level of delusion, so it’s worth more to him than the real thing could ever be. The value of illusion has never been a thing lost on JoJo Franklin.

And now Jimmy DeSade’s outside his door, waiting to do business, the simple exchange of pure white powder for green paper. JoJo puts his glasses back on his face, wire frames hooked around his ears, and the three ladies in the painting swim into focus, gently euphoric furies hiding one more deception, the counterfeit bills just up from Miami, stacked neatly in his

safe, fit company for his ledgers and the darker secrets in manila and old shoe boxes; good as gold, better than.

The topmost drawer of his desk is open, and the little pistol is right there where it should be, tucked reassuringly amid the pencils and paper clips. Just in case, but he knows there'll be no ugly and inconvenient drama with Jimmy DeSade, creepy fucking zombie of a man, but a sensible zombie; no more trouble than with the Haitians the night before, the Haitians who are always suspicious of one thing or another, but these bills so goddamn real even they hadn't looked twice. Jimmy DeSade will take the money and carry it northwards like a virus, no questions asked, no fuss, no trouble. In a minute or two, Jo Franklin will push the intercom button, will tell Arlo to send the smuggler back, but he's thirsty, and something about the pale and skinny man always makes him thirstier, so a brandy first and *then* the intercom, then the zombie and this day's transaction.

Jo Franklin rests his hand a moment on the butt of the pistol, cold comfort through fingertips, before he slides the drawer shut again.

Four knocks loud on the door to Rabbit's room, four knocks heavy and slow, reckless sound like blows more to hurt the wood than get attention, and he blots his lips on the cheap tissue, sparing a quick pout for the mirror before, "Yeah, it's open," and it is, the door, slow swing wide and hall light spilling in around them. Rabbit sees the men reflected without having to turn his head, and he sits very still, seeing them. Both dark, skin like black, black coffee and both so fucking big. Rabbit can't really see their faces, only silhouettes with depth: one much thinner than the other and wearing sunglasses, the other bald and built like a wall. Concrete in a suit meant to look expensive. Pause, heartbeats, and "Come in," he says and wonders if he said it loudly enough, because the men don't move, and his voice grown small and brittled in an instant. Christ, it's not like he hasn't done doubles before. Not like Arlo would ever let anyone come up those stairs that was gonna be a problem. Speaking to the mirror, scrounging calm, "C'mon, he says. "You can shut the door behind you."

A low whisper from one or the other, and the bald man laughs, a hollow, heartless laugh before Rabbit breathes in deep and stands to face them. The tall man first, his face so slack, his bony arms so limp at his sides, torn and dirty Mickey Mouse T-shirt and rattier pants, no shoes on his knobby feet. Movement underwater slow, sleepwalker careless, like those

four knocks, and the bald man follows after. He shuts the door, and the lock clicks very loud.

"Three hundred and fifty for the both," Rabbit says, cowering rabbit voice that wants to be brave, that wishes for the needle and sweet heroin salvation; the bald man smiles, hungry-dog smile and one silver tooth up front catching the candlelight. "*Ou chich,*" chuckled Creole and Rabbit shrugs, street-smart shrug even if he doesn't feel it. "Whatever," Rabbit replies, "We're priced to sell 'round here," and the ice not breaking even though the trick laughs again, every laugh just that much more frost in aching veins, laugh and "You're a funny *masisi*, funny faggot," Caribbean-accented bemusement, Jamaican or Haitian or something of the sort. The tall man just stands behind the fat man, stands with his back against the door, and doesn't smile or laugh or say a word.

Only part of their turn-on, trying to psych you out, and *Don't you let 'em fuck around with your head,* Rabbit thinks, trying to hear his own words in Arlo's voice, or Chantel's, Chantel three doors down who never gets cold feet with weirdoes. But it's still just his voice, small thing rabbit-whispering from tall bayou grass. And a fat roll of bills comes out of the bald man's coat pocket, rubber-band snap, and he's peeling off two, three, four, laying them down like gospel, like an exclamation point on the table by the door, the table with plastic lilies stolen late one night from a St. Louis vault. Sun-faded plastic lilies in a dry vase.

"Gonna fuck you till you can't sit down, funny *masisi*," and Rabbit looks to the money for strength, four one hundred dollar bills, crisp new paper, bright ink hardly touched, and there's an extra fifty in there, fifty free and clear of Franklin's cut. "Yeah," he says. "Whatever you want, Mr. – " and the customary pause, blank space for an alias, your name here, but the bald man is busy getting out of his jacket, too busy to answer, or maybe he just doesn't want to answer. The tall, still man takes his companion's jacket, drapes it gently across one thin arm, like some nightmare butler, and the bald man reaches for his zipper.

"What about him?" Rabbit asks, trying to sound hooker-tough, but almost whispering instead, sounding scared instead and hating it, motioning at the man with his back pressed to the bedroom door. "He doesn't talk much, does he?"

"He don't talk at all, and he don't fuck. So you don't be worrying about him. You just gonna worry about *me*."

“You paid enough, for both – ”

“*Fèmen bouch ou*,” and a sudden flicker like lightning in the man’s dark eyes, flickering glimmer down a mine shaft so deep it might run all the way to Hell. Rabbit doesn’t understand the words, but enough meaning pulled from the tone of that voice, from those eyes and the hard lines of his face to know it’s time to shut up, just shut the fuck up and play their game by their rules until it’s over.

“Stop talking and take off that ugly dress,” the man says, and Rabbit obliges, unzips quickly and lets the very plain black dress fall around his ankles, a pool of black cotton around his heels to step out of, reluctant step closer to the man. His pants already down, grey silk trousers to match the jacket, but no underwear, uncircumcised droop, bizarre and fleshy orchid, organ, but he’s getting hard, and Rabbit knows he’ll probably be using hemorrhoid pads tomorrow, shitting a little blood as well. The pants are hung on the tall man’s arm now, too, and still no emotion in that face, every movement past slow or efficient, pared to jerky last stop before coma paralysis. Rabbit feels cold inside, more naked than can be explained by the discarded dress; the bald man makes a satisfied sound in his chest, mumbled approval, and Rabbit glances at himself in the dresser mirror. His thin body like a teenage girl’s, almond skin, legs and underarms shaved smooth, and he’s wearing nothing now but the black lace and satin, bra and panties trimmed with scarlet, naughty somber contrast, matching garter belt and thigh-high net stockings on his long legs: nothing to mar the cultured illusion of his femininity except the subtle bulge at his crotch and the flatness of his chest.

“Sure you a boy?” the man asks, and this is nothing new, this question and the answering so routine that Rabbit can almost relax a little. He hooks a thumb into the front of his panties, pulls them down enough to reveal his own sex, the sex of his flesh, and the man nods, one hand rubbed across his hairless, glinting scalp. “Leave them on.” he mutters.

“Sure, if that’s what you want,” and now the man’s big hands are on him then, sweat-warm palms and fingers over his cool skin. Hard kiss like something desperate, something forced that isn’t, but needs to *feel* that way, faint cigar taste, tongue pushing past Rabbit’s teeth and inside him, exploring teeth and palate and his own tongue. And then their lips parting, and a string of spittle between them to cling to Rabbit’s chin.

“Bend over, bitch,” the bald man says, and Rabbit bends over, hands on the bedspread, ass to Heaven, and he feels his panties coming down, draws a deep breath before two wet fingers shove their way inside him, probing, working his asshole, and he closes his eyes, braces knees against the sagging bed as those strong hands grip his thighs, purchase found, strong fingers to leave bruises behind, and there’s the smallest whimper from Rabbit’s lips as the bald man’s cock pushes its way inside.

The very last door at the sunset end of a hall that is all doors, six choices with antique crystal knobs to ease decision, and that last door is Chantel Jackson’s; been here longer than anyone, any of the boys, longer even than Arlo. Her end of the deal upheld after JoJo Franklin paid for her trip to Brussels, money she’d never have to resolve the quandary between her legs, and money he’d never miss. In return, she’s the house specialty now, this one all the way, not just a pretty boy in frilly drawers, no shit, wanna know what it’s like to fuck pussy that used to be dick? And she’s got no complaints, so many ways things might have gone so much worse, and that resolution all she ever really wanted, anyway.

No complaints except that magnolia right outside her window, and there’s a few minutes before her two-fifteen so she sits on her bed, smokes and watches that scary old tree, the sash down and locked, smudgy glass protection between her and those crooked limbs, big leaves like the iridescent green shells of a thousand gigantic beetles. Nothing good about that tree, and mostly she ignores it, keeps the blinds down and tries not to notice the shadows it makes on her walls day and night. But sometimes, like now, when the demons inside are worse than the demons outside, she tries to stare it down, make it blink first, make *it* flinch. She imagines that magnolia shriveling the way movie vampires do if the sun gets at them, all those leaves turning brown and dropping off, the tree gone to dust before they even touch the ground, the gnarled trunk husk laid bare like a guilty heart, and wood cracks and splits, and the earth opens to take it back down to Hell. Or, maybe it bends itself over, pulls up its roots, tired of the masquerade if some tranny hooker bitch has its number, anyhow, and so it shamefully drags itself back to the swamps, move over, Mr. Catfish, move over, Mr. Snapping Turtle, and it’ll lie waiting in some black pool until everyone’s forgotten it again.

“Silly fool,” she whispers, knows it’s goddamned ridiculous to be scared of an ugly old tree when there’s plenty enough else to be scared of in this city; silly bitch, but there’s her church-neat line of charms and candles, anyway, painted saints and plastic Jesus and Mother Mary on the windowsill. Her careful shrine just in case it’s not so silly to be afraid of ghosts after all, ghosts and worse things than ghosts.

They used to hang pirates from that tree, someone said, and thieves and runaway slaves, too. Just about everyone got hung from that tree, depending on who you happen to ask. And there’s also the tale about the Storyville lovers: impossible and magic days a hundred years ago when hooking and gambling were legal, Storyville red-light before the whole district was razed for more legitimate corruption: a gentleman gambler from Memphis, or St. Louis, or Chicago, and he fell in hopeless love with a black girl, or a mulattress, under this very tree, except she was a *loup-garou,* and when she finally showed him her real face he went stark raving bug-fuck mad. Some claim you can still find their initials carved in the trunk, name-scars trapped inside a heart, if you know where to look, can still hear her crying if the moon and wind are right. Can still hear the greenstick snap of his bones between her teeth.

None of that folktale shit even half as bad as the bleached animal skulls and little skeletons wired together wrong ways round, charms the voodoo women still leave in the limbs when no one’s watching, the things JoJo won’t ever cut down, won’t even let Arlo get near them, never mind the awful racket they make whenever a storm blows up.

And tonight it just stares right back at her, that magnolia and all its guarded secrets, truths and lies and half-truths, steadfast, constant while the world moves around it. *Not tonight it ain’t gonna blink for you or for nobody else, not a chance,* she thinks, and then Chantel Jackson crosses herself, reaches for the dangling cord to lower the blind, and down there in the always-shadow that grows beneath a tree like this tree she sees the men coming, the dark and confident men on the overgrown walk to the front door nailed shut. And one face glances up, and maybe it sees her, small and haunted in the frame of her window, and maybe it doesn’t, but it smiles, either way, and she hears the wind, and the bones in the tree, like champing teeth and judgment.

The door bursts open, cracking splinter-nail explosion, door years sealed and boarded but off its rusted hinges in one small part of an instant and split straight down the center. Arlo doesn't wait to see, one hand beneath the bar and right back up with the shotgun Jo keeps mounted there, twelve-gauge slide-action always loaded, and he levels it at the bad shit pouring through the shattered door. Men huge and black and hard enough they barely seem real, skin like angry, living night, the flat glint of submachine gun steel and machete blades; the domino players cursing, scatter of bodies as Arlo levels the Winchester's barrel at the Haitians, white tiles flying like broken teeth, tables and chairs up for shields before the thunder. God of sounds so loud and sudden it wipes away anything else in the buckshot spray, and Arlo blasts the first big fucker through the door, and he also hits a man named Scooter Washington, slow and skinny shit into JoJo for almost ten thousand dollars, and Scooter falls just as hard.

Jimmy DeSade is moving now, scrambled vault uninvited over the bar and something coming out of his jacket, but no time for Arlo to see just what as he pumps the shotgun again, empty shell spit, and he makes thunder one more time before the Haitians are talking back, staccato bursts chewing apart the room, wood and plaster and flesh all the same. Hot buzz past Arlo's left ear, and the long mirror behind the bar comes apart, razor-shard rain as he drops to the floor, and it seems like every bullet ever made is hitting the bar, punching straight through the oak and finding the steel plating hidden underneath.

"Shit," he says, can hardly hear himself over the Uzis, but "Shit, shit, *shit*" anyhow, and Jimmy DeSade doesn't say a word, big-ass revolver in his steady white hands, the six-shot cylinder flipped open, chambers full, snapped closed again, careful man double-checking; the glass still falling on them, downpour of glass and whiskey, rum and all the sweet and sticky liqueurs. And then silence as harsh and sudden as the gunfire, heady quiet weighted at the edges with the choking stink of gunpowder and spilled alcohol.

"Sonofa*bitch*." Arlo knows how scared he sounds but doesn't care. Then the booming, pissed-off voice from the other side – "Hey there, Mr. JoJo Franklin!" – alligator-bellow voice pounding air still friable from the guns. "Where are you *at*, Mr. JoJo Franklin?"

"You *know* these people?" and a full moment passes before Arlo realizes that the question is meant for him, Jimmy DeSade and his shiny

black Smith and Wesson crouched back here with him, and Arlo wonders if his chances are really that much better on this side of the bar.

"Yeah," he says. "Yeah, I know them. They were around last night. Business with Jo, but I don't know what, honest. A bunch of Haitians from the other side of the river – "

"I say, I done come to talk to you, Mr. JoJo Franklin!"

Arlo swallows, fever-dry swallow, closes his eyes and digs down deep for calm, anything to make his hands stop shaking. "That one talking, he was with the Tonton Macoute, I think, before Duvalier went down."

"That's sure some reassuring shit, Arlo," words sizzling out between clenched teeth, and Jimmy DeSade stares up at the place where the mirror used to be.

"I don't know his name – "

"Going to have to start shooting again if you ain't gonna talk!" the Haitian shouts, and Arlo can hear the impatient, grinding sound of their boots on broken glass. "Going to have to start killing some of these fine people out here, Mr. JoJo Franklin!"

Jimmy DeSade bows his head, the tip of his sharp nose resting against the shark-fin sight at the end of the pistol's long barrel; he sighs, and that's another bad sound to make Arlo's stomach roll. "Stupid bastard's probably halfway to Baton Rouge by now," Jimmy DeSade whispers. "Wouldn't you say that's a fair enough guess, Arlo?"

"Yeah, probably," not like he's gonna disagree, no matter what he thinks, and not like he has any fucking idea *where* Jo might be at the moment, just wishing he was there, too, and it was somewhere far away, wishing he'd taken Rabbit and hit the road a long time ago. "We're absolutely fucked," he says. And Jimmy DeSade looks at him, and the sunglasses have slipped down his nose a little ways, far enough that Arlo gets a glimpse of the grey-blue eyes back there, almost the same eyes as Rabbit's: *wolf* eyes, and now he thinks maybe he's going to throw up after all.

"Sooner or later, everybody's fucked," Jimmy DeSade says calmly, resolutely, as he thumbs back the revolver's hammer and stands up.

After the bald man's come, and Rabbit lies on his stomach on the bed, squeaky springs finally silent again and his asshole on fire, forget the witch hazel, he's gonna be wearing fucking maxi pads on his butt. Semen-wet,

sweat-damp down there; blood, too, but he lies very still while the man puts his clothes on again, zips himself up, and Rabbit only clenches his fists a little because it hurts, and he wants to be alone. Wants to fix and go to sleep and forget these two ever happened.

"Good fuck, *masisi*," the man says, his satisfied grunt like Rabbit's stepfather pushing back from the dinner table after a big meal. "A shame that I have to kill a pretty piece of ass like you," and the words not quite registering, threat too many steps removed from here and now, as unreal and far away as the tall, death-quiet man standing at the door, but Rabbit's rolling over, turning so he can see the big bald man and his rumpled clothes and the machete in his right hand.

"It ain't nothing personal," he says, the sour hint of a smile at the thick corners of his mouth. "*Je suis un pauvre Tonton*, Miss Chantel, and I just do what my boss say to do, and *he* say it will teach JoJo Franklin a lesson if we kill his special whore."

Rabbit's mouth open and the words jammed in his throat, *I ain't Chantel*, words dead as corn in fear-dry fields, spit gone to paste. And the bald man's arm rises like proof of guilt and penalty being served.

"No, no. I'm not Chantel," ugly croak across Rabbit's lips, not his voice, but those were words, words this man should understand, even this man with an arm that ends in that long dark blade. "You got the wrong room – "

Abrupt apocalypse, then, downstairs cacophony and Armageddon coming up through the floorboards, everything there but the trumpets; Rabbit moving, belly scramble across the bed, and he can feel the shudder of shotgun blasts, one, two, before the machine-gun tattoo begins, and by then he's off the other side of the bed, falling like this was the edge of a flat world, no sound as he hits the floor because there's so much sound already. Blood in his mouth because he's bitten the tip of his tongue, and one hand's pushing in between the mattress and box springs, frantic grope, and it's there somewhere, it's always fucking there so why can't he find it. *I don't give a shit if it scares you*, Arlo said. *You're gonna take it and put it someplace you can get to it fast if you ever have to, okay?* But this isn't fast *enough*, not nearly fast enough.

Downstairs, the gunfire stops, and now there's just his heart and the bald man's footsteps coming round the end of the bed, the bald man cussing

the stupid little faggot on the floor, and Rabbit's hand closes around the cold butt of the pistol.

"I can make it fast for you," the bald man says, "if you just be still for me," and then he's looking at the gun in Rabbit's trembling hand, Rabbit scooting backwards across the floor, hard bump into the nightstand, and something falls off, breaks loud and wet. The bald man is laughing now. "*Oh*, you gonna shoot me, eh? You gonna shoot poor Charlot with that silly – " And Arlo says so calm and patient, *Squeeze the trigger, just point it and squeeze the trigger,* so Rabbit squeezes, winces expectantly, but it's not such a big sound after all, bottle-rocket pop, firecracker pop, and then that hole opening up like magic in the bald man's neck. Neat little hole barely big enough to put a pinky finger in, just a little blood for him to look so surprised as the machete clatters to the floor and his big hands fumble for his throat.

Rabbit squeezes the trigger again, and the man stumbles, sinking slowly to his knees, and there's still nothing much on his face but surprise. Grin wide and white teeth bared, mouth open to speak but there's only more blood, a fat red trickle from the corner of his mouth and down his chin.

"Fucking *die*, goddamnit," Rabbit growls, but it's like someone else said that, someone in a movie, and the next bullet hits the bald man square in the face; there's lots of blood this time, a warm and sticky mist that gets Rabbit before the man tumbles over on his side and lies dead on top of the machete. A quick glance at the tall man, almost-forgotten accomplice, and Rabbit's adrenaline-stiff arms pointing the pistol that way, but he hasn't moved, slack face just as blank as before, the dead man's jacket still draped across one arm.

"Whatever this shit's about," says Jimmy DeSade, speaking so calmly to the big Haitian, "it doesn't have anything to do with me." Arlo's still crouched on the floor with the shotgun, wondering if he can make the stairs without getting killed, maybe even make it all the way up to Rabbit's room, and then the both of them could duck down the rickety back steps to the alley and get the fuck away from here, just as far and fast as they can run.

"Who the hell are *you*?" says the big Haitian, and Jimmy DeSade replies, "Nobody. Nobody that wants any trouble," and then he kicks Arlo hard in the hip with the sharp toe of one of his sharp black boots.

“All we *got* here tonight is trouble,” says the Haitian and he laughs, laughter rumbling around the room like reckless desolation. “So you in the wrong damn place, Mr. Skinnybones White Man, if you don’t want no trouble.” And then Jimmy DeSade gives Arlo the boot again.

“*Fuck you,*” he says, before he has time to think better of it, words out before there’s any stopping himself.

“I don’t work for JoJo Franklin,” says Jimmy DeSade. “Whatever he’s done to you, it’s got nothing to do with me. And I don’t give a shit and a holler *what* you do to him. He probably has it coming.”

Silence for a moment, like maybe the Haitian’s thinking all this over, and Jimmy DeSade may as well be marble as flesh and bone, may as well be carved out of fucking ice, standing there with his finger on the trigger and the long barrel pointed straight ahead.

“But maybe I *don’t* care ’bout that, Mr. Skinnybones,” the Haitian rumbles. “Maybe I’m so pissed off tonight I just want to kill me all the ugly white motherfuckers I can find.”

Copperhead words from Jimmy DeSade’s pale lips, then, whisper-hiss dripping down on Arlo’s ears – “Get the hell up here, Arlo, or I swear to fucking God I’m gonna shoot you myself.” And because there’s nothing left to do, because he doesn’t have the guts to run, doesn’t have the guts to stay put, Arlo slowly stands up. Slow as a man can move, slow as dawn at the end of the world’s longest night. He clutches the shotgun to his chest, crucifix of steel, gunpowder rosary, and the two men are talking again, but there’s no room in his head for anything now but the meat-hammer sound of his heart.

And the sudden, clumsy thump and thud of footsteps on the stairs.

It’s not like in the movies, not at all, slow-motion painful so everything makes sense even if there’s nothing he can do to stop it; no time for regret and pointless dot-to-dot foresight. Time for nothing but scalding adrenaline and the Winchester coming down, pumped and both barrels emptied before Arlo knows it’s Rabbit, Rabbit half naked on the stairs and the tall black man trailing behind, tall man in a Mickey-the-fucking-Mouse T-shirt and *Can you* believe *that shit*? Tall man there to catch the body, all that’s left after Arlo’s pulled the trigger and the iron shot has done its work and there’s only the crimson-black hole where Rabbit’s belly was and the empty look on his pretty face that isn’t surprise or accusation or pain or anything else Arlo’s ever seen before.

A cold pearl sun almost up and the eastern sky turning oyster-white off towards Biloxi and Mobile; Jimmy DeSade sits hunched behind the Lincoln’s steering wheel, trying not to notice the muddy, dark waters of Lake Pontchartrain, the waves rough and sleek as reptile skin beneath the long bridge out of New Orleans. He lights a cigarette and keeps his eyes on the road, stares down the car’s long hood, the tarnished ornament like his pistol’s sight and his foot on the trigger.

Nothing he could have done back there, nothing else at all but what he did; twelve fat kilos of primo coke traded to the Haitians for his skin, and they let him walk away, luckiest fucking day of his whole shitty life, and there ought to be relief burning him up from the inside out, but there’s just the image of Arlo kneeling over the ruined body of the dark boy in women’s underwear. Arlo screaming, tin-and-gravel man-scream, a sound to keep the dead awake nights, and everything so ridiculously goddamn still as the shotgun turned towards the Haitians. The cartoon sharp *bang* when Jimmy DeSade put a bullet in Arlo’s head, *bang*, and the Winchester clattering to the floor. He knows it was that bullet saved his life, not the fucking dope; that’s a stone-cold fact, and there’s nothing he can ever do to change it.

Jimmy DeSade stares out at the stark and brightening world from behind his tinted lenses, and his big car rolls east, and the sun makes no difference whatsoever.

Breakfast in the House of the Rising Sun

Jimmy DeSade and I were shadow lovers for years, and never mind Salmagundi, who was also my lover for years. This story was conceived in the summer of 1995, much of which I spent in Poppy’s old house in New Orleans, sweating through long magnolia-scented nights. I was just beginning to find my voice here, my *first* voice, which would serve me well for a few years.

Estate

Rough and hungry boy, barely nineteen, that first time Silas Desvernine saw the Storm King, laid bright young eyes to raw granite and green rash rising up and up above the river and then lost again in the Hudson morning mist. The craggy skull of the world, he thought, scalped by some Red Indian god and left to bleed, grain by mica grain, and he leaned out past the uncertain rails of the ferryboat's stern, frothy wake-slash on the dark water and no reflection there. He squinted, and there was the railroad's iron scar winding around its base, cross-tie stitches, and already the fog was swallowing the mountain, the *A. F. Beach*'s restless side-wheel carrying him away, upriver, deeper into the Highlands, towards Newburgh and work in Albany. Now he opens his leathery old eyelids and it's deadest winter 1941, not that wet May morning in 1889. Old, old man, parchment and twigs, instead of that boy, and he's been nodding off again, drifting away, but her voice has brought him back. Her voice across the decades, and he wipes away a stringy bit of drool at the corner of his mouth.

"Were you dreaming again?" she asks, soft velvet tongue from her corner, and he blinks, stares up into the cold, empty light spilling down through the high windows, stingy, narrow slits in the stone of the long mansard roof.

"No," he mumbles. *No*, but he understands damn well there's no point to the lie, no hiding himself from her, but at least he's made the effort.

"Yes. You were," she says, Jesus, that voice that's never a moment older than the first time and the words squeeze his tired heart. "You were dreaming about Storm King, the first time you saw the mountain, the first morning."

"Please," no strength in him, begging and she stops, all he knows of mercy. He wishes the sun were warm on his face, warm where it falls in weak-tea pools across the clutter of his gallery. Most of his collection here, the better part, gathered around him like the years and the creases in his stubbled face. Dying man's pride, dead-man-to-be obsession, *possessions*, these things he spent a life gathering, stolen or secreted, but made his own so they could be no one else's. The things sentenced to float out his little forever in murky formalin tombs, specimen jars and stoppered bottles, a

thousand milky eyes staring nowhere. Glass eyes in taxidermied skulls, bodies stuffed with sawdust; wings and legs spread wide and pinned inside museum cases. Old bones yellowed and wired together in shabby mockeries of life, older bones gone to silica and fossilized, varnished, shellacked. Plaster and imagination wherever something might have been lost. Here, the teeth of leviathans; there, the claws of a behemoth. A piece of something fleshy that once fell from the sky over Missouri and kept inside a bell jar. Toads from stones found a mile underground. Sarcophagi and defiled Egyptian nobility raveling inside, crumbling like him, and a chunk of amber as big as an orange and the carbonized hummingbird trapped inside fifty million years.

A narwhal's ivory tooth bought for half a fortune, and he once believed with the unflinching faith of martyrs that it was a unicorn's horn. A precious bit of scaly hide from the Great Sea Serpent, harpooned off Malta in 1807, they said, and never mind that he knew it was never anything but the peeling belly of a crocodile.

"There's not much more time," she says. "A day, perhaps," and even her urgency, her fear, is patient, wet-nurse gentle, but Silas Desvernine closes his eyes again, prays he can slip back, fifty-two trips wrong way round the sun, and when he opens them he'll be standing on the deck of the ferry, the damp and chill no match for his young wonder, his anticipation and a strong body and the river rolling slow and deep underneath his feet.

"No," she says. "I'm still here, Silas."

"I know that," he says, and the December wind makes a hard sound around the edges of this rich man's house.

After the War, his father had run, running from defeat and reprisal and grief, from a wasted Confederacy. World broken and there would be no resurrection, no reconstruction. Captain Eustace Desvernine, who'd marched home in '65 to the shallow graves of wife and child, graves scooped from the red Georgia clay with free black hands. And so he faded into the arms of the enemy, trailing behind him the shreds of a life gone to ash and smoke, gone to lead and worms, hiding himself in the gaslight squalor and cobbled industrial sprawl of Manhattan. The first skyscrapers rose around him as the Union licked its wounds and forgot its dead.

Another marriage, strong Galway girl who gave him another son, Silas Josiah. The last dregs of his fortune sunk into a ferry, the *Alexander*

Hamilton, sturdy name that meant nothing to him, but he'd seen it painted on the side of a tall building. So, the Captain (as Silas would always remember him, the Captain in shoddy cap and shoddier coat on wide shoulders) carried men and freight from Weehawken to the foot of West Forty-Second Street. Later, another boat, a whitewashed side-wheeler, double-ender he'd named the *A. F. Beach*, and the year that Robert E. Lee died, the Captain began running the long route between New York and Albany.

One night, when Silas was almost twenty years old, almost a man himself and strong, he stood beside his father in the wheelhouse of the *A. F. Beach*. The Captain's face older by the unsteady lamp as they slipped past the lights of West Point on their way downriver. The Captain taking out his old revolving pistol, Confederate-issue Colt, dullshine tarnish and his callused thumb cocking the hammer back while Silas watched, watching the big muzzle pressed against the Captain's left temple. Woman's name across his father's lips then, unfamiliar "Carrie" burned forever into Silas' brain like the flash, the echo of the gunshot trapped between the high cliffs, slipping away into the river night and pressed forever behind his eyes.

"Are you sure that's the way it happened?" she asked him once, when he told her the story. Years and years ago, not so long after he brought her to his castle on Pollepel Island, and she still wore the wings, then, and her eyes still shone new-dollar silver from between the narrow bars of her cage.

"I was young," he said. "Very young," and she sighed, short and matter-of-fact sigh that said something, but he wasn't certain what.

Whole minutes later, "Who was she?" and him already turned away, unpacking a crate just arrived from Kathmandu.

"What?" he asked, but already remembering, the meaning of her question and the answer, absently picking a stray bit of excelsior from his beard and watching those eyes watching him.

"Carrie," she said. "Who was Carrie?"

"Oh," and "I never found out," he lied. "I never tried," no reason for the lie, but already he felt the need to guard those odd details of his confessions, scraps of truth, trifling charms. Hoarding an empty purse, when all the coins have gone to beggars' hands.

“Ah,” she said, and Silas looked too quickly back to the things in the crate, pilfered treasures come halfway around the world to him, and it was a long time before he felt her eyes leave him.

Pollepel Island: uneven jut of rock above water where the Hudson gets wide past the Northern Gate, Wey-Gat, the long stony throat of Martyr’s Reach, greenscab at the foot of Newburgh Bay; white oak and briar tangle, birch skin over bones of gneiss and granite. Bones of the world laid down a billion years ago and raised again in the splitting of continents, divorce of lands; birth of the Highlands in the time of terrible lizards, then scraped and sculpted raw, made this scape of bald rock and gorge during the chill and fever of ice ages. Pollepel Island like a footnote to so much time, little scar in this big wound of a place.

Silas Desvernine already a rich man when he first came here. Already a man who had traded the Captain’s ragtag ferries for a clattering empire of steel and sweat, Desvernine Consolidated Shipyard, turning out ironclad steamers, modern ships to carry modern men across the ocean, to carry men to modern war. And Pollepel chosen for his retreat from industry, the sprawling, ordered chaos of the yard, the noise and careless humanity of Manhattan. First glimpse, an engraving, frontispiece by Mr. N. P. Willis for *American Scenery*: tall sails and rowboat serenity, Storm King rising in the misty distance. The island recalled from his trips up and down the river, and the Captain had shown him where George Washington’s soldiers sank their *chevaux-de-frises*, sixty-foot logs carved to spikes and tipped with iron, set into stone caissons and dropped into the river off Pollepel to pierce the hulls of British warships.

This valley was already a valley of castles, self-conscious stately, Millionaire’s Row decades before Silas’ architects began, before his masons laid the first stones, since the coming of the men of new money, the men who nailed shining locomotive track across the nation or milled steel or dug ore and with their fortunes built fashionable hiding places in the wilderness; cultivated, delusory romance of gentleman farmers in brick and marble, iron spires and garden pools. But Silas Desvernine was never a man of society or fashion, and his reasons for coming to Pollepel Island were his own.

Modest monstrosity, second-hand Gothic borrowed from his memory of something glimpsed on a business trip to Scotland, augmented with the

architect's taste for English Tudor. The pale woman he married, Angeline, his wife, never liked the great and empty halls, the cold and damp that never deserted the rooms. The constant sound of the river and the wind, restless in the too-close trees, the boats passing in the night.

If he'd permitted it, Angeline Desvernine would have named the awful house, given a name to tame it, to bind it, make it her home, maybe, instead of whatever else it was. But, *No,* Silas said, stern and husbandly refusal, and so no poet ostentation, no Tioranda or Oulagisket or Glenclyffe on his island, just Silas' castle, Silas' Castle.

His dream, and the long night on the Storm King is never precisely the same twice and never precisely the way things happened. And never anything but the truth. The dream and the truth worn thin, vellum-soft, streampebble-smooth, these moments pressed between the weight of now and then and everything before, and still as terrible.

Younger but not young, reaching back and she takes his hand, or Angeline takes his hand, neither of them, but an encouraging squeeze for this precarious, slow climb up and up, above the river, while Prof. Henry Osborn talks, lecturing like the man never has to catch his breath.

"Watch your step there. A lot of loose stone about," he says, and Silas feels sixty instead of forty-five.

Somewhere near the summit, he lingers, gasping, tearing eyes, and he looks down and back, towards his island. A storm coming, on its way up the valley and so twilight settling in early, the day driven like dirty sheep before the thunderheads, bruisebelly shepherds and the muddy stink of the river on the wind.

"A shame about this weather, though, really," Osborn sighs. "On a clear day, you can see the Catskills and the Shawangunks."

Of course, Osborn wasn't actually with him that day, this day, and he knows that dimly, dim dream recollection of another history; another climb mixed in with this, the day that Osborn showed him a place where there was broken Iroquois pottery and arrowheads. Osborn, man whose father made a fortune on the Illinois Central, and so he's never known anything but privilege. The rain begins, then, wet and frying noise, and Henry Osborn squints at the sky, watches it fall as the drops melt his skin away, sugar from skeleton of wrought iron and seam welds. "On a clear day," he whispers

from dissolving lips, before his jaw falls, clank and coppertooth scatter, and Silas continues on up the mountain alone.

No one ever asked him the *why* of the collecting, except her. Enough what's and where's and how's, from the very few who came to the island. The short years when Angeline was alive and she held her big, noisy parties, her balls for the rich from other castles down the valley, for gaudy bits of society and celebrity from New York City or Philadelphia or Boston. Minor royalty once or twice. The curious who came for a peek inside the silent fortress on Pollepel. Long nights when she pretended this house wasn't different, and he let her play the game, to dull the edge of an isolation already eating her alive.

Later, new visitors, after the Great War that left him more than wealthy, no counting the fortune anymore, and Angeline in her lonely grave on the western edge of the island, their son gone to Manhattan, the yard run by so many others that Silas rarely left the island. Let whatever of the world he had need of come to him, and never more than one or two at a time, men and women who came to walk his still halls and wonder at this or that oddity. All of them filled with questions, each their own cyclopedia of esoteric interrogations, lean and shadowy catechists, a hundred investigators of the past and future, the hidden corners of this life and the next. Occultists, spiritualists, those whose askings and experiments left them on the bastard edges of science or religion. They came and he traded them glimpses of half-truths for the small and inconsequential things they'd learned elsewhere. All of them single-minded, and they knew, or mostly thought they knew, the why of his collecting, so no point to ever asking.

That was for her, this one thing he'd brought back to Pollepel that he was afraid of and this one thing he loved beyond words or sanity. The conscious acquisition that could question the collection, the collector.

"I have too much money," he said once, after the purchase of a plaster replica of Carnegie's *Diplodocus* skeleton to be mounted for the foyer, and she asked the sense of it "It's a way of getting rid of some of the goddamned money," he said.

She blinked her owl-slow, owl-wise blink at him, her gold and crimson eyes scoffing sadly.

"You know the emptiness inside you, Silas. These things are a poor substitute for the things you're missing." So he'd drawn the draperies on

her cage and left them drawn for a week, which was as long as he could stand to be without the sight of her.

Nineteen-eighteen, so almost three years after his son was pulled screaming from his wife's swollen body, pulled wet and blind into the waiting, dog-jawed world; helpless thing the raw color of a burn. His heir, but Silas Desvernine could hardly bear the sight of it, the squalling sound of it. Angeline almost dying in the delivery nightmare of blood and sweat, immeasurable hours of breathless pain. There would be no others, the doctor said. Named for father and grandfather's ghost, Eustace Silas, sickly infant that grew stronger slowly, even as its mother's health began to falter, the raising of her child left to indifferent servants; Silas seeing her less and less often, until, finally, she rarely left her room in the east wing.

One night, late October and the first winter storm rolling down on Pollepel from the mountains, arctic Catskill breath and Silas away in the city. Intending to be back before dark, but the weather so bad and him exhausted after hours with thick-headed engineers, no patience left for the train, so the night spent in the warmth and convenience of his apartment near Central Park.

Some dream or night terror, and Angeline left her rooms, wandered half-awake, confused, through the sleeping house, no slippers or stockings, bare feet sneak-thief soft over Turkish carpets and cold stone, looking for something or someone real. Someone to touch or talk to, someone to bring her back to this world from her clinging nightmares. Something against the storm rubbing itself across the walls and windows, savage snow pelt, wild and wanting in and her alone on the second story: the servants down below, her child and his nurse far away in another part of the house that, at that derelict hour, seemed to weave endlessly back upon itself. Halls as unfamiliar as if she'd never walked them, doors that opened on rooms she couldn't recall. Strange paintings to watch over her, stranger sights whenever she came to a window to stand staring into the swirling silver night, bare trees and unremembered statuary or hedges. Alien gardens, and all of it so much like the dream, as empty, as hungry.

Lost in her husband's house and inside herself, Angeline came at last to the mahogany doors to Silas' gallery, wood like old blood and his cabinet beyond, and how many years since she'd come that way? But *this* she recognized, hinge creak and wood squeal as she stepped across the

threshold, the crude design traced into the floor there, design within designs that made her dizzy to look directly at.

"Silas?" No answer but the storm outside, smothering a dead world. Her so small, so alone at the mouth of this long and cluttered gallery of glass and dust and careful labels, his grotesquerie, cache of hideous treasures. Everything he loved instead of her; the grey years of hating herself flashing to anger like steam, flashing to scalding revelation. Something in her hands, an aboriginal weapon or talisman pulled from its bracket on the wall, and she swung it in long and ruthless arcs, smashing, breaking, shadow become destroyer. Glass like rain, shatter puddles that sliced at the soles of her feet, splinter and crash and the sick-sweet stench of formaldehyde. Angeline imagining gratitude in the blank green eyes of a two-headed bobcat that tumbled off its pedestal and lay fiercely still, stuffed, moth-gnawed, in her path.

And the wail rising up from the depths of her, soul's waters stagnant so long become all at once a tempest to rival the fury and thundervoice of the blizzard. Become a war cry, dragging her in its red undertow, and when she reached the far side, the high velvet drapes hiding some final rivalry: tearing at the cloth with her hands, pulling so hard the drapes ripped free of brass rings and slipped like shedding skin to the floor.

Iron bars, a cage, and at first nothing else, gloom thick as the fog in her head, thick as jam, but nothing more. One step backwards, panting, feeling the damage to her feet, and the subtle shift of light or dark, then, all the nothing in the cage coalescing, made solid and beautiful and hateful, hurting eyes that she understood the way she understood her own captivity, her own loneliness.

The woman with wings and shining bird eyes said her name, *Angeline*, said her name so it meant things she'd never suspected, some way the name held everything she was in just three syllables. One long arm out to her, arm too long and thin to believe, skin like moonlight or afterbirth, fingers longer still and pointing to the door of the cage. Padlocked steel and the interlace design from the threshold again, engraved there like a warning. "Please," the woman in the cage said. "*Please*, Angeline."

Angeline Desvernine ran, ran from even the possibility of this pleading thing, gallery door slammed shut behind her, closing it away and closing away the fading illusion of her victory. Almost an hour before she found her way back to her own room, trailing pools and crusting smears of blood from

her ruined feet; crawling, hands and knees, at the end. She locked her door. By then, the sound of servants awake, distant commotion, her name called again and again, but there was no comfort left after those eyes, the ragged holes they'd burned in her. No way not to see them or hear that silk and thorny voice.

Most of the storm's fury spent by dawn, by the time the maids and cooks and various man servants gave up and called for someone from the stables to take the door off its hinges. First sight, leadflat morning light filling up the empty room, the balcony doors standing open wide and tiny drifts of snow reaching almost to the bed. They found her hanging from the balustrade, noose from curtain-cord tiebacks, snow in her tangled black hair, crimson icicles from the sliced flesh of her toes and heels. Her eyes open wide and staring sightlessly towards the Storm King.

"They're my dreams," he says, whispers loud, and she says "They're lies," and he keeps his eyes on the last colorless smudges of afternoon and says low, mumbled so she won't hear, "Then they're my lies."

This time, this dog-eared incarnation of the climb up Storm King, he's alone, except for the thunder and lightning and rain like wet needles against exposed skin, wind that would take him in its cold fist and fling him, broken, back down to the rocks below, to the impatient, waiting river. No sign anymore of the trail he's followed from the road, faintest path for deer or whatever else might come this way and now even that's gone. He can see in the white spaces after the thunder, flash-powder snapshots of the mountain, trees bending and the hulk of Breakneck across the river, Storm King's twin. Jealous Siamese thing severed by the acid Hudson, and he thinks, *No, somewhere deep they're still connected*, still bound safe by their granite vinculum below the water's slash and silt.

Thunder that sounds like angels burning, and he slips, catches himself, numb hands into the roots of something small that writhes, woodsy revulsion at his touch. He's shivering now, the mud and wet straight through his clothes. He lies so still, waiting to fall, to drown in the gurgling runoff, until the thunder says it's time to get moving again and so he opens his eyes. And soon he's standing at the summit, a little clearing and the tall stone at its heart like a stake to hold the world in place. Grey megalith-like things he's seen in England or Denmark or France, and in the crackling

brief electric flash he can discern the marks made in the stone, marks smoothed almost away by time and frost and a hundred thousand storms before. Forgotten characters traced in clean rivulets like emphasis. He would turn and run, from the place and the moment (*if you had it to do over again, if you could take it back*), but the roots have twisted about his wrists, becoming greenstick pythons, and for all his clever, distracting variations, there's only this one way it can go.

She steps out of the place where the stone is, brilliant moment, thinnest sliver of an instant caught and held in forked-lightning teeth; the rain that beads, rolls off her feathers, each exquisite, rough-gem drop and the strange angles of her arms and legs, too many joints. The head that turns on its elegant neck, and the eyes that find him, sharp face and molten eyes that will never let him go.

"Nothing from the Pterodactyle, I shouldn't think," says Professor Osborn, standing somewhere behind him. "Though the cranium is oddly reminiscent of *Dimorphodon*, isn't it?" and Silas Desvernine bows his head, staring down at the soggy darkness where his feet must be, and waits for the leather and satin rustle of her wings, gentle loversound through the storm. The rain catches his tears and washes them away with everything else.

The funeral over and the servants busy downstairs when Silas opened the doors of his gallery; viewed the damage she'd done for the first time, knew it was mostly broken glass and little that couldn't be put right again, but the sight hurt his chest, hurt his eyes. Heart already so broken and eyes already so raw, but new pain anyway. No bottom to this pain, and he bent over and picked up his dodo, retrieved it from a bed of diamond shards, and Silas brushed the glass from its dusty beak and rump feathers. Set it back on the high shelf between passenger pigeons and three Carolina parakeets. He took step closer to her cage, the drapes still pulled open, and his shoes crunched. Her, crouched in the shadows, wings wrapped tightly about her like a cocoon, living shield against him, and he said, "What did you do to her, Tisiphone?" And surprise at how calm his voice could be, how empty of everything locked inside him and clawing to get out.

The wings shivered, cringed and folded back; "That's not my name," she said.

"What did you do to her, Megaera?"

“Shut up,” his words spat at the wall where her face was still hidden, spat at him. “You know that I’m not one of the three, you’ve known that much all along.”

“She couldn’t have hurt you, even if she’d wanted to,” he said, hearing her words, but this is as close as he would ever come to being able to ignore them: her weak, and his grief too wide to cross even for her voice. “Did you think she could hurt you?” he asked.

“*No*,” and she was shaking her head now, forehead bang and smack against brick, and he could see the sticky, black smear she left on the wall.

“Then you did it to get back at me. Is that it? You thought to hurt me by hurting her.”

“No,” she said, and that was the only time he ever saw her cry, if it was crying, the dim phosphorescence leaking from the corners of her eyes. “No, *no*.”

“But you know she’s dead, don’t you?”

“Yes,” she said, that small *yes* too quick, and it made him want to wring her white throat, lock his strong hands around her neck and twist until he was rewarded with the pop and cartilage grind of ruined vertebrae. Squeeze until her tongue hung useless from her lipless mouth.

“She never hurt anyone, Alecto,” he hissed, and she turned around, snake-sudden movement, and he took a step away from the bars despite himself.

“I asked her to *help* me,” and she was screaming now, perfect crystal teeth bared. “I asked her to free me,” and her hurt and fury swept over him, blast furnace heat rushing away from her, and the faint smell of nutmeg and decay left in the air around his head.

“I *asked* her to unlock the fucking cage, Silas!” and abruptly the wings slipped from off her back and lay bloody and very still on the unclean metal and hay-strewn floor of the cage.

In the simplest sense, these things, at least, are true: that during the last week of June 1916, Silas Desvernine hired workmen from Haverstraw to excavate a large stone from a spot near the summit of Storm King, and that during this excavation several men died or fell seriously ill, each under circumstances that only seemed unusual if considered in connection with one another. When the foreman resigned (a mink-eyed little Scotsman with a face like ripe cranberries), Silas hired a second crew, and in July the stone

was carried down and away from the mountain, an ingenious block-and-tackle of his own design, then horse and wagon, and finally, barge, the short distance upriver to Pollepel Island. Moneys were paid to a Mr. Harriman of the Palisades Interstate Park Commission, well enough known for his discretion in such matters, and no questions were ever asked.

And also, that archaeologists and anthropologists, linguists and cryptographers were allowed brief viewings of the artifact over the next year, though only the sketchiest, conflicting conclusions regarding the glyphs on the stone were drawn: that they might have been made by Vikings, or Phoenicians, or Minoans, or Atlanteans; that they might be something like Sanskrit, or perhaps only the tracks of prehistoric sea worms, or have been etched by Silas Desvernine himself. The suggestion by a geologist of no particular note, that the stone, oily black shale with cream flecks of calcite, was not even native to the region, was summarily ignored by everyone but Silas, who ignored nothing.

One passing footnote mention of “the Butterhill Stone” in a monograph on Mahican pottery, and by 1918 it was forgotten by the busy, forgetful world of men and words beyond the safeguarding walls of Silas’ Castle.

“Wake up,” she says. “You must wake up,” and he does, gummy blink, unfocused, and the room’s dark except for the light of brass lamps with stained-glass shades like willows and dragonflies and drooping purple wisteria.

“You’re dying, Silas.”

He squints towards the great cage, cage that could hold lions or leopards, and she looks so terribly small in there. Deceptive contrast of iron and white, white skin, and she says, “Before the sun rises again…”

Big sigh rattle from his bony chest, and “No,” looking about the desk for his spectacles. “No, not yet,” but she says, “You’re an old man, Silas, and old men die, eventually. All of them.”

“Not yet,” and there they are, his bifocals perched on a thick book about African beetles. “There’s a new war, new ships that have to be built,” and he slips them on, frame wire bent and straightened and bent again so they won’t sit quite right on his face any longer. Walking cane within reach, but he doesn’t stand, waiting for the murky room to become solid again.

“Let me go now,” she says, as if she hasn’t said it a thousand, thousand times before, as if it were a new idea, never occurred to her before, and he laughs. Froggy little strangled sound more like a burp.

“You’re trying to trick me,” he says, grinning his false-toothed grin at her and one crooked finger pointed at the cage so there can be no doubt. “You’re not a sibyl,” and it takes him five minutes to remember where he’s put his pocket watch.

“I can hear your tired old heart, and it’s winding down, like your watch,” and here it is, in his vest pocket; 4:19, but the hour hand and minute hand and splinter second hand still as ice. He forgets to wind it a lot these days, and how much time has he lost, dozing at his desk? Stiff-neck crane, and he can see stars through the high windows.

“You can’t leave me here, Silas.”

“Haven’t I always *told* you that I won’t?” still watching the stars, dim glimpse of Canes Venatici or part of the Little Bear. The anger in his voice surprises him. “Haven’t I said that? That I’ll let you go before I die?”

“You’re a liar, Silas Desvernine. You’ll leave me here with all these other things that you’ve stolen,” and he notices that her eyes have settled on the tall glass case near her cage, four tall panes and the supporting metal armature inside, the shriveled, leathery things wired there. The dead feathers that have come loose and lie scattered like October leaves at the bottom of the case.

“You would have destroyed them if I hadn’t put them there,” he mumbles. “Don’t tell me that’s not the truth,” turning away, anything now to occupy his attention, and it was true, that part. That she’d tried to eat them after they’d fallen off, before he took them away from her, still warm and oozing blood from their ragged stumps.

“*Please*,” she whispers, the softest snowflake excuse for sound, and “Please, Silas,” as he opens a book, yellow-brown paper to crackle loud between his fingers, and adjusts his bent spectacles.

“I keep my promises,” he grumbles, and turns a dry page.

Estate

First time I saw the Hudson River, this story began. Finally, I saw the castle, which still stands. Mostly. My first to make a “year’s best” anthology, and that meant all the world to me for a short while. So many of my obsessions are locked inside this story, that hummingbird in amber.

Rats Live on No Evil Star

“I think that we’re fished for,” Olan says, menthol cigarette smoked almost down to the filter, and he’s sitting at the unsteady little card table by the window, staring out at the high January sky, that disheartening sky like a flawed blue gemstone, and Jessie stops smearing peanut butter on slices of soft white bread and looks at him.

“What?” she asks, and he only nods at the sky so that she has to ask again. “What did you say, Olan?”

“I think we are *fished* for,” the words repeated loudly and more slowly, as if she’s only deaf and stupid, after all, and he’s making perfect sense.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” not meaning to sound annoyed, and she puts two pieces of thickly peanut-buttered bread together, another sandwich for this lean and crazy man who lives down the hall, this man to whom she is neither related nor can call her friend. But if no one looks in on him, he doesn’t eat. Jessie cuts the sandwich into neat triangles, trims away the crust because he only pulls it off anyhow. She places it on one of the pink saucers that she’s rescued from the kitchen’s clutter of filthy dishes, wasteland of cracked plates and coffee cups for the cockroaches to roam. She had to bring the soap from her own apartment down the hall, of course, that and a clean dishrag.

“I don’t mind listening,” she says, setting his sandwich down in front of him. “If you want to try to explain.”

Olan exhales, stubbing out his cigarette in a ceramic ashtray shaped like Florida, dozens of butts and cinder-grey ash spilling onto the top of the table. He looks at the sandwich instead of the sky, but his expression doesn’t change, the one as much a mystery to him as the other. He takes a hesitant, small sip from the beer that Jessie has brought him. She doesn’t often do that, but sometimes, just a bottle of the cheap stuff she drinks while she writes, Old Milwaukee or Sterling or PBR sacrificed to his reliable indifference.

“Never mind,” he says and glances at her through his spectacles, wire and some Scotch tape wrapped around one corner, thick glass to frame his distant eyes. He takes a bite of the sandwich and looks at the sky while he chews.

“What are you working on today, Jessie?” he asks around the mouthful of peanut butter as she sits down across the table from him. “Anne Sexton,” she says. Same answer as always, but that doesn’t matter, because she knows he only asks to be polite, to seem to care. Her eyes are drawn to the window, too, past the dead plant in its clay pot on the radiator, leaves gone to dry and wilt-brown tendrils. Out there, the railroad glints dull silver beneath the white, white sun, parallel lines of steel and creosote-stained cross ties, granite and slag ballast, the abandoned factories and empty warehouses on the other side, a few stunted trees to emphasize the desolation.

She looks away, back down at her own lunch, bread with the crust still on, something mundane to break the spell. “I’m beginning a new chapter this afternoon,” she says, not feeling hungry anymore.

“The Death Baby?” he asks, and she shakes her head *no*, “I’m done with the Death Baby for now.”

“*There*,” Olan says and presses the tip of one finger against the flyblown glass, pointing at something he sees in the sky. “Right there. See it?” And Jessie looks. She always looks, and she’s never seen anything yet. But she doesn’t lie to him, either.

“I don’t see it,” she says. “But my eyes are going to shit. I spend too much time staring at fucking computer screens.”

“Well, it’s gone now,” he says very quietly, but only as if to let her off the hook, because his eyes don’t leave the window. Olan takes another bite of the sandwich, another sip of beer to wash it down, and his eyes don’t leave the window.

The tiny apartment on the west side of a Southern city that once knew thriving industry and has seen long decades of decay, foundries and mills closed and the black smoking skies gone and the jobs gone with them. Not the Birmingham of his childhood, only the shell of the memory of that city, and farther east the hungry seeds of gentrification have been planted. In the newspapers, he has read about the “Historic Loft District,” a phrase they use like Hope or Expectancy. But *this* apartment existing on its own terms, or his terms, this space selected twenty years ago for its unobstructed view of the sky, and that hasn’t changed.

Three very small rooms and each of them filled with his books and newspapers, his files and clippings and folders. The things he has written

directly on the walls with Magic Marker because there wasn't time to find a sheet of paper before he forgot. Mountains of magazines slumped like glossy landslides to bury silverfish and roaches, *Fate* and *Fortean Times*, journals for modern alchemists and cryptozoological societies and ufology cults. Exactly 1,348 index cards thumbtacked or stapled to plaster the fragile, drained color of dirty eggshells and coffee-ground stains. Testaments uncorrelated, data uncollated, and someday the concordance and cross-reference alone will be a hundred thousand pages long.

After the girl has left (The Academic, as he thinks of her), Olan finds the fresh and stickybrown smear of peanut butter on the kitchen window, his shitcolored fingerprint still there to mark the exact spot, and he draws a black circle onto the glass around it. There are other circles there, twenty-three black *and* red circles on this window, and someday he will draw interconnecting lines to reveal another part of the whole, his map of the roof of the sky.

"I don't see it," he whispers, remembering what she said, and something a doctor told him to say years ago, when he was still a boy and might have only have grown to be a man who could say "I don't see it" when he does.

Olan sits at the window, new ink drying as the sun sinks towards twilight. Black ink to indicate a Probable Inorganic, tentative classification of the shimmering orb he saw hanging in the empty sky above the city. A pencil sketch already in one of his notebooks, and best-guessed estimates of height and dimension underneath it, something like a bowling ball as perfectly motionless as the train tracks down below.

"Visible for approx. 14 minutes, 1:56 until 2:10 P.M. CST," he wrote, not sure of exactly how long because the girl kept talking and talking, and then he saw her to the door, and when he got back it wasn't there anymore, had fallen or vanished or simply drifted away.

"I don't see it," he says again, her borrowed words and inflection, and then he takes off his glasses and rubs at his tired and certain eyes.

This is Page One. Which is to say – this is where the story begins when he is asked to tell it as a story, when he *used* to tell it for the doctors who gave him pills and advice and diagnoses. The linear narrative that has as little and as much truth as any necessary fiction ever has, any attempt to relate, to make the subjective objective.

“I was seven, and we lived on my granddaddy’s farm in Bibb County, after my father went away, and my mother and I lived there with my grandmother because my granddaddy was already dead by then. It wasn’t a *real* farm anymore, but we did have chickens and grew okra and tomatoes and collards. I had a dog named Biscuit.

“One day – it was July – one July day in 1955, when I was seven, Biscuit chased a rabbit into the woods. And I was standing in the field beside the house calling him, and there were no clouds in the sky. No clouds at all. I’m sure there were no clouds. I was calling Biscuit, and it began to rain, even though there weren’t any clouds. But it wasn’t raining water, it was raining blood and little bits of meat like you put into a stew, shreds of red raw meat with white veins of fat. I stopped calling Biscuit and watched the blood and meat hitting the ground, turning it red and black. There was a crunchy sound, like digging in a box of Rice Crispies for the toy at the bottom, a very faint cereal-crunching sound that came from the sky, I think.

“And then my mother was yelling and dragging me back towards the house. She dragged me onto the front porch, and we stood there watching the blood and meat fall from the clear sky, making puddles and streams on the ground.

“No, Biscuit never came home. I couldn’t blame him. It smelled very bad, afterwards.”

He has a big jar on the table beside the mattress where he sleeps, quart mayonnaise jar, and inside is the mummified corpse of something like a mouse. It fell out of the sky three years ago, dropped at his feet while he was walking the tracks near the apartment building, this mouse-thing husk from a clear sky, and he has labeled it in violet, for Definitive Organic.

The girl from #407 doesn’t usually bring him supper, but she did one night a month ago now, and she also brought some typed pages from her dissertation. She cooked him canned ravioli with Parmesan cheese and made a fresh salad of lettuce with radish and cucumber slices. They ate it together, sitting on the paper-cluttered floor while she talked about the work of a poet who had committed suicide in 1974. He had never read the poet, but it would have been impolite not to listen, not to offer a few words when he thought he wouldn’t sound too foolish.

“It’s a palindrome from a barn somewhere in Ireland,” the girl said, answering a question about the title to one of the poems. “Someone had painted it on a barn,” and then she produced a tattered paperback that he hadn’t noticed in among her pages. She read him the poem that began with the title from the barn. He didn’t understand it, exactly, Adam and Eve and the Fall, words that sounded good put together that way, he supposed. But, those words, STAR. RATS STAR, those words like a hand placed flat against a mirror, like bookends with nothing in between.

“Sometimes she called herself Ms. Dog,” the girl said, and he saw the trick at once – Dog, God.

“I would very much like a copy of that poem,” he said to her, chewing the last bite of his salad. And three days later she brought him a photocopy of those pages from the paperback, and he keeps them thumbtacked to a wall near the window. He has written RATS and STAR and RAT’S STAR on the wall in several places.

The sun is down, down for hours now, and Olan sits at the card table at the window, studying by the dim fluorescent light from the kitchenette. He has *The Book of the Damned* by Charles Fort opened to page 260, and he copies a line into one of his notebooks: “Vast thing, black and poised, like a crow, over the moon.” This is one of the books that makes him nervous – no, one of the books that frightens him. *The Golden Bough* makes him nervous, Gilgamesh makes him nervous, and *this* book, this book frightens him. Goosebumps on his arms for a sentence like that: “Vast thing, black and poised…” Things that were seen casting shadows on the moon in 1788, things between earth and moon, perhaps, casting shadows.

He flips back two pages and copies another line: “Was it the thing or the shadow of a thing?” Fort’s taunting question put down in Olan’s obsessive-neat cursive, restated in precisely the same ten words. He pauses and lights a Newport and sits smoking, staring out the window, trying to find the sense in the question, the terrible logic past his fear.

There is only a third-quarter sliver of moon tonight, and that’s good, he thinks, too poor a screen for anything’s shadow.

Down on the railroad tracks there’s movement, then, and a flash, twin flashes of emerald, a glinting reflection like cats’ eyes caught in a flashlight or headlights. Olan sits very, very still, cigarette hanging limp from his lips, cough-drop smoke coiling about his face, and he does not even blink. Waits

for the flashes to come again, and if there were a moon tonight he might see a little better, he thinks, a moment ago happy there was no more light in the sky but now, the not knowing worse than the knowing, and so he strains his eyes into the night. But he sees nothing else, so in a moment he goes to the buzzing fluorescent bulbs above the sink and switches them off, then sits back down in the dark. There's still a little glow from the next room, but now he can see the tracks better.

"I don't see it," he says aloud, but he does, that thin shape walking between the rails, the jointed, stilt-long legs, and if there are feet he cannot see them. "It *could* be a dog," he whispers, certain of nothing but that it isn't a dog. He thinks it has fur, and it turns its head towards him, then, and smiles, yes, yes, Olan, it's smiling, so don't pretend it isn't, don't fucking pretend. He squeezes his eyes shut, and when he opens them again it's still there. He sits very still, cold sweat and smoke in the dark, as it lingers a moment more on the tracks, and then gallops away towards the row of abandoned factories.

"Did you ever talk about this with your mother or grandmother?" the doctor (not doctor, not real doctor – therapist) asked him, and he shook his head.

"No," he said. "We didn't ever talk about that day."

"I see," the therapist said and slowly nodded her head. She did that a lot, that slow up and down agreement or reassurance nod, and chewed the eraser end of her pencil.

"What else can you remember about that day, Olan?" she asked him.

He thought a moment, what to say, what to hold back, what could never be explained, thoughtsifting, filtering, and finally said, "We went inside, and she locked all the doors and windows. My grandmother came out of the kitchen and watched with us, and she prayed. She held her rosary and prayed. I remember that the house smelled like butter beans."

"You must have had it all over you, then? The blood."

"Yeah," he said. "When it stopped falling, my mother took me to the bathroom and scrubbed my skin with Ivory Soap. She nearly scrubbed me raw."

"Did your mother often give you baths, Olan?" the therapist asked, and he looked at her a while without answering, realizing how angry he had

become, the sudden fury nested in him for this woman who nodded and feigned comprehension and compassion.

“What are you getting at?” he asked her, and she took the pencil eraser from her mouth.

“Was it out of the ordinary, that degree of intimacy between you and your mother?”

“I was covered in blood,” he said, hearing the brittle edge in his voice. “Both of us were, and she was scared. We thought maybe it was the end of the world.”

“So it was unusual? Is that what you’re saying?”

And he remembered his mother dragging him down the hall, a redblack handprint smear he left on the wall, and her crying and stripping off his ruined clothes, the suspicion that it was somehow *his* fault, this horrible thing, and Where’s Biscuit? he’d kept asking her, where’s Biscuit?

“I have to go now,” he said, and the therapist put down her pencil and apologized for nothing in particular, apologized twice if she’d upset him. He paid her, twenty-five dollars because she was seeing him on a sliding scale, she’d explained at the start. A twenty and three ones and some change, and she gave him a receipt.

“Will you be back next week? I have you down for three o’clock on Thursday, but if that’s too late – ”

“I don’t know,” he said, dishonest, and she nodded again, and Olan never went back to her office.

“Well?” he asks the girl, The Academic, “Are you going to open it or not?” and she looks up slowly from the brown paper bag in her hands, confused eyes, surprise and a scrap of a smile on her lips.

“Is this a present?” she asks. “Are you giving me a present, Olan?” And he can hear the caution, the do-I-want-to-encourage-this-sort-of-thing wariness in her voice. But he knows that she will accept what’s in the bag, because she’s brought him food and beer and talked to him, and rejecting such a small reciprocation would seem unkind. He has noticed that The Academic has a great unwillingness to seem unkind.

“It’s not much,” she says as the hallway silence is interrupted by the rustle of the paper bag when she opens it. She reaches inside and takes out the padlock and hasp set, the shrink-wrapped Yale he bought at a hardware store seven blocks away. “It’s not much,” Olan says again, because it isn’t,

and because he thinks that's the sort of thing you say when you give someone a gift.

She stares at it a moment without saying anything, and he says, "It's a rough neighborhood. It didn't used to be, but it is now."

"Yeah," she replies, and he can see that she's still rummaging for words. "Thanks, Olan. That's very thoughtful of you. I'll put it on the door this afternoon."

"You're welcome," and to change the subject, because it's not hard to see how uncomfortable she is, he asks "How's the new chapter coming along?"

"Ah, um, well, you know. It's coming," she says and smiles more certainly now, shrugs, and "God, I'm being so rude, letting you just stand out there in the hall. Do you want to come in, Olan? I needed to take a break anyway."

"No," he says, maybe a little too quickly, but he has notes he must get back to, and the walk to the hardware store has cost him the better part of the afternoon already.

"Are you sure? I could make us some coffee."

He nods to show that yes, he is sure, and "It's in the Southern Hemisphere," he says. She looks confused again, and he recognizes the familiar patience in her confusion, the patience that shines coolly from her whenever she doesn't immediately understand something he's said.

"Sextens," he says. "The Sextant constellation. The Rat's Star," and now there's the vaguest glint of comprehension in her, surfacing slow like something coming up from deep water for a breath of air. "I didn't know if you knew that. If you knew much about astronomy," he says.

"No, I didn't know that, Olan. That could be interesting. I mean, I don't think anyone's ever made that connection before," and now she's staring back down at the padlock like maybe she's just noticed it for the first time.

"There are three actually," he says. "Three stars in an isosceles triangle, like this," and Olan tries to show her with his hands, geometry of thumb against thumb, the intersection of index fingers. "Like a ship's sextant," he adds.

"That could be very helpful to know."

"I have books, if you ever need them." He's already turning away from her, can sense that he's made her uneasy, has spent plenty enough years

making people uneasy to see the signs. “I have a lot of books on stars, if you ever need any of them. I know you take good care of books.”

And she says, “Thanks,” as he walks away towards his own apartment door at the other end of the hall. “And thanks for the lock, too, Olan,” she says, like an afterthought.

On one wall he has taken down twenty-seven index cards, accounts of living things found encased in solid stone, toads and worms mostly, and he has written live evil where the cards were. Two elements of the palindrome taken out of context and reconnected, like rat’s star. Sometimes the truth is easier to see when things are disassembled and put back together another way. That’s what The Academic does, he thinks, takes apart the words of dead women and puts them together differently, trying to find the truth hidden inside lines of poetry. That’s what he does with his books and newspapers.

Now Olan lies in the dark on his springshot mattress that smells like sweat and tobacco smoke and maybe piss, too, and the only light is coming in through the window above his head, falling in a crooked rectangle on the opposite wall, so he can read LIVE EVIL where he took down the cards.

He lies still, listening to the building and the city outside, and he thinks: there is never any getting closer to the truth, no matter what you write on paper cards or plaster walls, no matter how you rearrange the words. Because the truth is like the horizon, relative to where you’re standing, and it moves if you move. And he thinks that he should get up and turn on a lamp and write that in one of his notebooks, that he might forget it before morning. Then he hears the sound: broomsticks thumping on the stairs, that staccato wooden quality to the sound, broomsticks or stilts maybe, and he remembers the long-legged thing from the train tracks the night before. He wonders if its long legs might not make that sound coming up the stairs. His heart is beating faster, listening, as the sound gets closer, not on the stairs any longer, thump, thump, thumping in the hallway, instead. But far down at the other end, near The Academic’s door, not his, and he lies very, very still hoping that she has done what she said, that she has put the extra lock on her door.

And then he realizes that there is another kind of noise, fainter, but worse to hear, a wet and snuffling sort of noise, like something sniffing along the floor, or at the narrow crack beneath a closed door. A purposeful,

searching noise, and he stares across the shadow-filled room towards the door, getting cold from his own sour sweat despite the radiator. In a few minutes, the snuffling noise stops and the thumping begins again, as whatever's in the hall moves on to the next door down.

"I don't hear it," Olan whispers, and he hides his face in his pillow and waits for daylight.

Morning like clotted milk hanging in the sky, and Jessie, her arms loaded with overdue library books stacked up to her chin, dreading the cold outside and the bus ride to school. Jangle of her key ring in the quiet hallway: key for the doorknob and the dead bolt and the door out to the street, key to the laundry room and mailbox, one more for her shabby little office at the university; all hung together on a shiny loop of brass and a tarnished brass tab with her initials engraved there, a Christmas gift five years old from a now-dead father. It's a sideshow contortionist trick, locking the door, shifting the books, and the one on top slides off, *The World Into Words* falling to the dusty floor. Jessie leaves the keying dangling in the lock and stoops to retrieve the fallen book, cursing loudly when the rest of the stack almost tumbles over as well, but she catches them by leaning quickly forward against the door.

"*Fuck,*" she says, hard and angry whisper, and her breath fogs in the cold air. It's too fucking early for this shit. She rests her forehead against the wood, swallows, pushing down the camera-flash of rage, knows that she's overreacting, knows that's what her shrink would say.

And then, looking down, she sees the marks in the door, the deep gouges near the floor, and for a second she thinks it's just something that has always been there and she never noticed, that's all. But there are splinters on the floor, too, old wood freshly broken, and a fresh scatter of scaly paint flakes the color of bile. And, the last thing she notices, a faint, unpleasant smell, lingering in the heavy cold, smell like a wet dog and something gone bad at the back of a refrigerator, smell like animal and mildew and mushrooms.

"Jesus," not bothering to whisper anymore. "Jesus H. Christ." She carefully sets the books on the floor and explores one of the gouges with the tip of a finger, the rough and violated wood sharp against her soft skin. Jessie turns and looks down the hall, and there are similar marks on other doors, and a wide diagonal slash across Olan's so big that she can see it all

the way from her end. She shivers, not a cold shiver, but a prickling at the back of her neck, short-hair tingle down her arms at the sight of each of the doors with their own individual scars. But all of them are closed, no sign that whoever made the gouges actually managed to break into a single one of the apartments.

Jessie locks her door, thinking of the gift from Olan, unopened and lying useless on her coffee table. *It's a rough neighborhood*, he said, and she picks up her books again, more attention to balance this time. She tries not to think about junkie with crowbars, crackheads with tire irons wandering the building while she slept, shit like that. When she gets home she'll dig out a screwdriver and hammer and put Olan's shiny new padlock on the door.

A seeker of Truth. He will never find it.
But the dimmest of possibilities – he may himself become Truth.
Charles Fort, *The Book of the Damned* (1919)

Rats Live on No Evil Star

Because in Birmingham I did watch the sky far too much, and sometimes there were things there. The stick dogs, they've been with me almost forever, and likely always shall be. Oh, and Charles Fort, of course. And Anne Sexton. And all damned things.

Salmagundi

(New York City, 1981)

Elgin is sipping his second beer and watching the empty space past the footlights that haven't been turned on yet, matte-black plywood hole hardly big enough to call a stage, small by even the frugal standards he's gotten used to the last two years; these two years frantically divvied between New York and LA, Seattle and San Francisco, watching, interviewing, writing up everything from guerrilla street theater to post-feminist performance art for *The Village Voice* and anyone else who will pay him enough to pretend this is journalism. Fuck that, just anyone willing to publish what he says, what *they* say to him. Tonight, and this piece for *RE/Search,* for a volume on industrial culture. He looks at the flyer again, torn off a telephone pole on Bleecker Street. Paper the color of a blood stain, maybe, or a ketchup stain, at least, and the sort of cut-up art he would have expected – violent, disconnected images from anonymous sources, and hand-printed across the top, "Salmagundi" and a date and an hour and the address of this place where a rat would think twice about taking a dump. SubAllegory, the sign above the door says, though that wasn't on the flyer.

Elgin folds the ragged piece of red paper and stuffs it back into his shirt pocket. His beer is warm and tastes like something made from fermented cornflakes.

And then the lights come up, dazzling sudden white in the smoke and gloom, and so now it is a stage, or at least a place where something is about to happen, so it'll have to do. The murmuring crowd jammed into SubAllegory stops murmuring, and their heads turn, their eyes turn, as the eyes of one hungry multibodied organism turning to see, starving and maybe in a moment there will be something edible offered up. But there's only a mountain of bone, jackstraw pyramid of carefully balanced and interlocked femora and skulls, ribs and dry shoulder blades; mostly cow and pig, Elgin guesses, maybe some sheep, bone trash gathered from local meat packers and butchers. He has his stenographer's pad and his pencil, and he's long since learned to make notes in the dark, graphite scrawl he can decipher later in brighter places.

There are other things, suspended by metal wire or nylon fishing line and hooks, crimson-gray chunks of meat and organs – a heart, a liver, a length of oyster-violet intestine – all these suspended at varying heights, hung to form a rough and floating mandala about the bones. And now that he thinks about it, Elgin realizes that he can smell the meat, old blood and a faint hint of rot in the cold basement air of the place – “a faint odor like fetid subtext,” he writes quickly without taking his eyes off the stage.

There must be speakers he can’t see, because suddenly there’s sound, a painful eruption of sound, instant as the light, feedback whine and an arrhythmic clatter like chains against shattered glass. Sound to make him wince, to make them all wince, the audience creature rediscovering forgotten and instinctual reactions, but not smart enough to run, not smart enough to cower or hide. And the sound climbs an octave, gouging its way deeper into Elgin’s head. He thinks there may be a voice somewhere inside the cacophony, more than one voice, perhaps, mumbling words he can almost hear, subliminal current of words that could be threats, that *feel* like whispered threats overheard, or that could be casual perversities, or both, or could be nothing at all. His mouth is dry, and the beer sits forgotten on the bar.

On the stage, the mound of bones seems to shift, rearranging itself subtly, an almost imperceptible sort of movement, and Elgin squints through the glare and cigarette smoke and noise to be sure. And yes, they are indeed moving, each bit of skeleton independent of the other, flexing or contracting somehow without sending the whole precarious thing clattering over. It makes him think of the hide of some great armored reptile – impossible, warped alligator or crocodile hurting or dying or waking up. He writes that down, as well.

Violin-string squeal that melts by grating slow degrees into a scream or piercing howl, something calling out in pain so terrible it can only be expressed in this endless, agonized lament. And past that, *within* that, an audible cracking, then, fracturing shell-brittle pop, loud enough that it manages to pull free, achieving singularity, and Elgin feels it hit him, a fist driven against his chest, an invisible cudgel that almost knocks the breath from him. The audience creature seems to lean slightly forward, expectant, impatient for its extinction, an end to their boredom, their jaded enlightenment. Elgin knows that whatever’s happening, it can only end in disappointment for them, that no revelation is even half equal to their need.

And then the bones *do* break apart, a silent tear or slit in the side facing him, jagged mouth or vagina; thick liquid squirting out, dark and syrupy gouts like a punctured carotid, and two or three people sitting right up front move back a little, wiping at their clothes or faces or hair with fingers reluctant to touch the substance, yet curious to know, disgusted and excited by disgust. The howl is fading now, growing distant or imploding, and it leaves behind a dull-heart thump-thump-thump that's more metal than flesh, steam-hammer pound in air raped into stillness, into vacuum, by sound.

The slit grows a little wider, and Elgin can see something membranous inside, pressing itself outward, a glinting surface slimy with whatever a mound of bones can bleed. The thumping is getting louder, steel slammed against steel, and he wants to close his eyes, wants to look away, but he doesn't do either. It's not his job to look away; his job is to watch, no matter what, to watch what they have to show and then put it into words.

The crowd gasps collectively as the membrane bursts, rips wide, and spills its huge fetus onto the stage. Hesitant motion inside a caul the raw color of living viscera, and he can see the winding umbilicus leading back inside the slit, back inside this writhing thing's dead and fleshless mother. The smell of rotting grows stronger, and he can see maggots squirming in the lights, hundreds or thousands of them, and now the audience creature is breaking up, losing cohesion as more and more of its constituent parts back away from the stage.

The mechanic heart crashes, pumps train collisions and the inevitable collapse of skyscrapers, steel and concrete, as she tears herself free, hands and arms as pale as skin that has never seen the sun, that cannot imagine warmth or light, thrust towards them all. The caul heaves once, slides heavily to stage right, heaves again, and she's free and ripping at the cord leading back into that appalling, dead womb, tearing at it with vicious teeth, furious, grinding jaws; her long hair flails and slaps wetly from side to side, slinging drops of liquid and maggot afterbirth into the crowd.

Elgin doesn't remember getting to his feet, standing, defeated, but he's pushing people aside, roughly shoving his way through the press of bodies to the door, out into the south Manhattan night air that has never before smelled so clean, never half so pure. He climbs the cement stairs leading up to the street, then leans gasping against a brick wall, trying to force the cloying sweet decay smell from his nostrils, and when Elgin Murray

glances down at his stenographer's pad, there's hardly anything written there at all.

"You're Murray," the girl says, doesn't ask but says it like an order, like he might have ever thought he had some choice in the matter. "The guy that wants the interview."

He nods, yeah, dropping the butt of his cigarette to the sidewalk and crushing it out with the toe of his boot. The girl's hair is the color of pomegranates, and she's wearing blue jeans and a sweatshirt stained with streaks of something that might be oil or stage blood.

"C'mon then," she says, a hint of irritation or displeasure in her voice, and he follows her around the corner, away from SubAllegory.

"She doesn't talk to a lot of people," the girl says. "Not just anybody, you know. You gotta understand that. You're lucky, man, getting to interview her."

"Yeah," Elgin replies, and the girl leads him down a flight of stairs, dark burrow below a porn shop, no light at the bottom and the February air like soup down here, the cold that condensed,
that gelid.

"Watch your step," she tells him. "There might still be some ice." The girl hammers on a door with her fist, blam, blam, blam, and in a moment there are voices from the other side.

"Who's there?" one of the voices asks, and the girl hits the door again, punching the wood for an answer.

"Fucking ConEd, motherfucker," she growls. "Who the hell do you think? Open the door. I'm freezing my ass off out here, goddamnit. It's just me and the guy," and the metal sound of locks being turned, then, entrance being reluctantly granted, and Elgin hastily combs at his hair with his fingers.

"Sorry," the girl says to him as the door opens. "We have to be careful, you know. Since that show in Jersey. Man, that was a total freaking shitstorm."

And a big black man lets them in, finally. There's someone smaller standing directly behind him, but, for now, *this* man is all that matters, muscles like a threat beneath ragged clothes; he glares at Elgin, suspicious eyes paid to be that way, and then the girl is towing him forward, out of the night into a narrow hallway painted glossy tangerine. Not much warmer in

here, and that doesn't surprise him, but at least they're out of the wind. She takes him past doors with numbers that seem to have been assigned at random, no perceptible order, metal numerals nailed to orange doors, 8 and 21 and 3, and the air smells like dust and mildew and someone cooking curry.

"I didn't see her come out," Elgin says, watching the doors, part of him still looking for a pattern to the numerals, and the girl says, "There's a back way in, straight from the studio. There's all sorts of shit down here, man. It's like a goddamn rat maze under these buildings."

"Oh," he says as they stop at the door numbered 12, fifth in line but it gets to be 12 anyway, and there's a pencil-thin junkie sitting on the floor outside, flipping through a tattered *Hustler* magazine.

"Is she ready for us?" the girl asks him, and the junkie sniffles loudly and wipes his nose on the back of one hand. "He's the guy?" the junkie asks, rheumy eyes on Elgin, and the girl says, "Yeah, he's the guy. Is she ready or not?"

"Ready as she'll ever be," the junkie says and smiles, uneven, rotten yellow smile, and he goes back to his magazine, the gaudy nudes spreading themselves on shiny paper, and the girl says, "You know you're just wasting your time, Willy. How many months now since you had any kinda hard-on? You know you're just torturing yourself with that shit."

"Hey, baby, I do *remember,* okay? I haven't forgotten what it *feels* like, so it doesn't hurt me to look." The junkie gives the girl the finger as she knocks three times and turns the knob to door number 12.

"I don't know why she keeps that piece of shit around here," the girl confides to Elgin, as if the junkie can't hear. Willy mumbles something obscene, but doesn't bother to look away from his magazine.

The room is small, almost warm and not the cultured squalor he expected at all. Rather, unanticipated mix of scruffy Victorian and Art Deco, a clutter of antiques ruined by time and neglect and the places that they've been. Pleasantly muted incandescence after the hallway from fringed table lamps and stained-glass torchères; a framed Erté print on one wall and a Beardsley on another, something he remembers from a book of Poe or Wilde; a chaise lounge upholstered in burgundy velvet beneath a makeshift canopy of scarves and lace, a dressing table nearby, and Elgin and the girl look back at themselves from its wide, revealing mirror.

“Does she carry all this stuff around with her?” he asks, and the girl’s reflection nods. She points him to a chair, dark scrolled wood scuffed, mother-of-pearl inlay, and more patched velvet the color of spilled wine, so he sits down and opens his stenographer’s pad again. The girl closes the door behind her, leaving him alone, and Elgin stares at the almost-blank page that he should have filled with notes during the performance, hoping that what he remembers about the show is anything like what really happened.

From the next room someone says “Just shut up about it, Jimmy, okay? Jesus, just shut up about it,” and Elgin sits up straight, didn’t even realize there was another room, but now he can see a door past the chaise, a dog skull hung there, its snout pointing down towards the floor and a filthy Turkish carpet he notices for the first time.

The door swings open then, and she steps into the room, final heir to a great grandfather’s lost fortune, lost great granddaughter of the Gilded Age, his first sight of her outside photocopied art zines and then that fetal thing that she became on stage. “Breathtaking,” he will write in the interview, though after an argument with an editor he’ll cut that word and substitute “disarming,” knowing that it doesn’t really matter either way because neither word is any closer to the truth. Salmagundi Desvernine: blonde, blonde hair still wet and dark from a shower, bare feet, and her maroon bathrobe something cheap to pass for silk, her face like porcelain that might break at the gentlest touch, like ice or porcelain, and she stops and squints across the room towards him.

“Hello,” she says, lips the palest pink not smiling, and the voice to match the face exactly, voice like crystal chimes tinkling in underground winds.

“Hello,” he says back.

“Did I keep you waiting?” and he shakes his head, no.

“I just got here.”

“Good,” she says. “Would you like a drink?” and then Elgin sees the man behind her, still standing in the doorway, closer to a boy than a man, really, but tall, taller than her, *paler* than her, and his eyes hidden behind black wraparound shades. He chews nervously at one black fingernail and stares past Salmagundi, black-plastic stare towards Elgin that makes him feel nine or ten years old again and facing the rat bastard of all schoolyard bullies.

He glances back down at his notepad. “That would be nice,” he says. “A drink would be nice.”

“Jimmy, pour Mr.…?”

“Murray,” Elgin volunteers at once. “Elgin Murray.” She smiles for him, painful soft smile and perfect sapphire eyes.

“Pour Mr. Murray a drink. Is brandy okay? We have brandy and cognac.”

“Brandy’s fine,” Elgin says, smiling back and watching her, carefully not looking at her ashen-skinned companion in black leather and a ripped up T-shirt, black jeans and lizard-skin cowboy boots.

“*Brandy’s fine*,” the tall man sneers, mocking him; there are a couple of decanters on a small table nearby, cut glass half filled with liquid amber, and the tall man pours Elgin a drink from one.

“They told me that you don’t like tape recorders,” Elgin says to Salmagundi, and she nods, sitting down at the dressing table only a few feet away from him, and she stares at herself.

“I dislike hearing my voice that way,” she says. “Knowing that someone can push a button and make you say things you might not mean anymore. Things you might never have meant in the first place.”

“But it’s okay if I take notes?” Elgin asks, holding up the pad so she can see it in the mirror, and yes, she nods, smiling again, but not such a welcoming smile this time, as if the mirror’s distracting her.

The tall man walks across the room and hands Elgin a big snifter of brandy, the glass

badly chipped around the rim and the initials S. D. engraved on one side like etched frost.

“Thanks,” Elgin says, accepting the drink, but the man’s face is blank, blank disregard for this polite intruder, and Elgin can see himself in the black sunglasses. He doesn’t like what he sees there, as if he’s seeing someone else’s disapproving impression of him times two, and it’s better to focus on the questions that he’s spent a week putting together.

Salmagundi picks up a tarnished silver brush from the dressing table, pulls it carefully through her long wet hair.

“That was an amazing performance tonight,” he says to her, and the interview begins.

She removes an old tin box from one of the drawers as she talks, all dents and the gold paint flecked off in places, rust like a skin disease; Elgin

recognizes the portrait on the lid, the perfect profile at the center of an intricate mosaic of color like Muslim tiles of paint for ceramic. If the design isn't actually one of Alphonse Mucha's, then a clever enough forgery, and the beautiful Nouveau face close enough to the woman sitting at the dressing table to give Elgin a serious case of the heebie-jeebies. salmagundi printed in blocky red letters underneath the portrait, stylized "Whitman's" in the lower left-hand corner and "chocolates" in the lower right.

"Then it is true?" he asks, trying not to sound surprised and failing. "About your name, I mean."

Salmagundi Desvernine pauses, the lid of the box already half open, and she glances sidewise at him, not using the dressing mirror as a middle man this time, but looking directly at him, instead. Then she glances back at the box as if she hasn't *really* looked at it in a very long time, and maybe it's not only a tin box after all, but something more that she pretends is only a tin box.

"It was my mother's," she says. "It was my grandmother's, and she gave it to my mother."

"And that's where she got your name, off that tin?"

"It used to really make my sister laugh, that I was named after a box of candy."

And then she opens the box the rest of the way, and he can see there's a small plastic baggie of white powder inside, a razor blade, and a samll mirror that might have been popped out of a compact. Other things too, crammed in there, but she closes the box before Elgin can see what they are. She untwists the rubber band holding the baggie closed and carefully pours cocaine onto the little mirror, minces it with the razor blade. Elgin looks down at his notepad, trying hard to remember what he was going to say next.

"You were asking me about the film project," she says, and "Yeah," he replies, "…*Between the Gargoyle Trees*, why didn't you finish it?," embarrassed but relieved to be reminded, relieved to get on with it. The tall, pale boy in leather and sunglasses is watching him now, and Elgin imagines the kind of eyes those glasses might hide, intent and predatory eyes, jealous eyes the color of jade idols or a stormy autumn sky.

"I saw a clip last year in Montreal, a very brief clip, but it was definitely – "

“It was bullshit, Elgin,” Salmagundi says quickly, finishing his sentence for him, and she’s made three neat lines of the coke. She uses a shortened bit of straw to snort the first two. She closes her eyes then, fists clenched, jaw clenched and a hint of her white teeth. Thirty seconds, forty, and “It was a mistake,” she adds and wipes her nose with a Kleenex from a box on the dressing table. “A lumbering, pretentious mistake. I’m just glad I figured that out before I wasted any more time on the damned thing. “Tt was worse than the poems. I thought maybe I could explain these ideas with film, explain them visually, since they’ve killed poetry.”

“Who’s killed poetry?”

She looks at him a long moment, wry hint of a smile pulling at the corners of her mouth like fishhooks; Salmagundi shakes her head, and her sapphire eyes sparkle.

“*They,* Elgin. They. Everyone since fucking Yeats and T. S. Eliot. Jesus, whatever all these fuckers call themselves today. *They.* The ‘poet-citizens.’ You can’t really touch people with poetry anymore, because it’s been taken apart, deconstructed, eviscerated, and no one even *half* remembers how to put it back together.” And then she snorts the third line and closes her eyes again.

Elgin nods uncertainly; he wants a cigarette so badly it almost hurts, thinks about lighting one, but there are no ashtrays anywhere in the room. “The stuff that you’re doing now is so reminiscent of Mark Pauline,” he says, instead, and tries not to think about the boy named Jimmy.

“Yeah, I saw *Male/Female Relations* last August, and then I talked with Mark afterwards. He showed me how to build a lot of the things I’m using, got me thinking in the right direction, anyway. Organic machines, reanimation.”

“But you’re still dealing with the same fundamental issues you were speaking to in …*Between the Gargoyle Trees*, right? The post-industrial landscape.”

She puts one hand to her forehead, one finger pressed between her eyes, “Jimmy, put on some music, okay?”

“What do you want to hear?” he asks her without moving from his chair in the shadows.

“Anything. Anything at all. I can hear the cars. Anything so I can’t hear the goddamn cars and the people talking upstairs.” So Jimmy gets up and goes to an old reel-to-reel on a shelf near the door leading back out to

the tangerine hall, hits a switch, and the Velvet Underground's "All Tomorrow's Parties" blares from the speakers.

"I hate that phrase," she says. "I loathe it," and before Elgin can ask what she means, "Post-industrial," she adds. "As if there's nothing left now but the aftermath, like post-modern, as if there's no way that we can possibly define ourselves except in relation to…Fuck, Jimmy, is that the only tape we *own*?"

"You said it didn't matter," Jimmy sighs, sullen voiced, returning to his chair. "And your hour's up, Mr. Murray," he adds. "It was up five minutes ago."

"Yeah," Elgin replies, and he checks his wristwatch. "Just a couple more questions, okay, and then I'll get out of your hair."

"I said, your hour is *up*," and Jimmy is speaking deliberate and threatful now. He leans forward, leans towards Elgin, and his eyebrows rise slowly into dark arches above his black shades. "Mr. Murray, I won't repeat myself again."

Elgin looks to Salmagundi for support, but she's laid her head on the dressing table, eyes closed, one hand resting on the antique candy box as if for comfort. Her damp hair hides most of her pretty face.

"You really should go now, Elgin," she says, not unkindly. "You only asked for an hour."

And so he closes his pad, has learned not to push these things; surely he has enough for the article. Jimmy stands and opens the door for him.

"Thanks," Elgin says. "I really do appreciate your time." He looks back once, just before the door closes and locks behind him, and he sees her face framed in the mirror, that porcelain face still stained by the Hudson Valley money it came from, watching him leave, and her gemstone eyes are bright and weary. Something tiny and white like a single living grain of rice falls from her forehead and lies wriggling on the dressing table by the Whitman's tin.

Their eyes mid many wrinkles, their eyes,
Their ancient, glittering eyes, are gay.

W. B. Yeats, "The Gyres" (1938)

Such things I hear, they don't make sense.
I don't see much evidence.

I don’t feel. I don’t feel. I don’t feel.
Sisters of Mercy, “Lucretia, My Reflection” (1987)

Salmagundi

Peter Straub has called Salmagundi Desvernine “Caitlín’s avatar.” He called her that in 1999 or 2000, whenever he wrote his afterword for *Tales of Pain and Wonder*. I know it was true back then. She was, just as Jimmy DeSade was my shadow. In the nineties, I was seized by a longing for lost Victorian and Edwardian ages, but that soon faded and died. Salmagundi also faded and died, and, shortly thereafter, Jimmy DeSade was no more than ashes. New avatars have come and gone. I’ll not name them.

Postcards from the King of Tides

Here’s the scene: The three dark children, three souls past twenty, but still adrift in the jagged limbo of childhoods extended by chance and choice and circumstance, their clothes impeccable rags of night sewn with thread the color of ravens and anthracite; two of them fair, a boy and a girl and the stain of protracted innocence strongest on them; the third a mean scrap of girlflesh with a black-lipped smile and a heart to make holes in the resolve of the most jaded nihilist, but still as much a child as her companions. She sits behind the wheel of the old car, her sage-grey eyes staring straight ahead, matching their laughter with seething determination and annoyance, and there’s the bright, seething music, and the forest flowing around them, older times ten hundred than anything else alive.

The winding, long drive back from Seattle, almost two days now, and Highway 101 has become this narrow asphalt snake curving and recurving through the redwood wilderness, and they’re still not even as far as San Francisco. Probably won’t see the city before dark, Tam thinks, headachy behind the wheel and her black sunglasses because she doesn’t trust either of the twins to drive. Neither Lark nor Crispin have their licenses, and it’s not even Tam’s car; Magwitch’s piece-of-shit Chevrolet Impala, antique ’70s junk heap that might have been the murky green of cold pea soup a long, long time ago. Now it’s mostly rust and Bondo and one off-white door on the driver’s side. Countless bumper stickers to hold it all together.

“Oooh,” Lark whispers, awe-voiced, as she cranes her neck to see through the trees rushing past, the craggy coast visible in brief glimpses between the trunks and branches. Her head stuck out the window, the wind whipping at her fine, silk-white hair, and Tam thinks how she looks like a dog, a stupid, slobbering dog, just before Crispin says, “You look like a *dog*.” He tries hard to sound disgusted with that last word, but Tam suspects he’s just as giddy, just as enchanted by the Pacific rain forest, as his sister (if they truly are brother and sister; Tam doesn’t know, not for sure, doesn’t know that anyone else does either, for that matter).

“You’ll get bugs in your teeth,” Crispin says. “Bugs are gonna fly right straight down your throat and lay their eggs in your stomach.”

Lark's response is nothing more or less than another chorus of *ooohs* and *ahhhs* as they round a tight bend, rush through a break in the treeline, and the world ends there, dropping suddenly away to the mercy of a silver-yellow-grey sea that seems to go on forever, blending at some far-off and indefinite point with the almost colorless sky. There's a sun-bright smudge up there, but sinking slowly westward, and Tam looks at the clock on the dash again. It's always twenty minutes fast, but still, it'll be dark long before they reach San Francisco.

She punches the cigarette lighter with one carefully-manicured index finger, nail the color of an oil slick, and turns up the music already blaring from the Impala's tape deck. Lark interprets that as her cue to start singing, howling along to "Black Planet," and the mostly bald tires squeal just a little as Tam takes the curve ten miles an hour above the speed limit. A moment in the cloud-filtered sun, blinding after the gloom, before the tree shadows swallow the car whole again. The cigarette lighter pops out, and Tam steals a glance at herself in the rearview mirror as she lights a Marlboro: yesterday's eyeliner and she's chewed off most of her lipstick, a black smear on her right cheek. Her eyes a little bleary, a little red with swollen capillaries, but the ephedrine tablets she took two hours ago, two crimson tablets from a bottle she bought at a truck stop back in Oregon, are still doing their job and she's wider than awake.

"Will you sit the fuck down, Lark, before you make me have a goddamn wreck and kill us all? Please?" she says, smoky words from her faded lips. Lark stops singing, pulls her head back inside and Crispin sticks his tongue out at her, fleshpink flick of I-told-you-so reproach. Lark puts her pointy black boots on the dash, presses herself into the duct-taped upholstery, and doesn't say a word.

They spent the night before in Eugene and then headed west, following the meandering river valleys all the way down to the sea before turning south towards home. Almost a week now since the three of them left Los Angeles, just Tam and the twins because Maggie couldn't get off work, but he told them to go, anyway. She didn't really want to go without him, knew that Lark and Crispin would drive her nuts without Magwitch around, but the tour wasn't coming through LA or even San Francisco. So, she went without too much persuading, *they* went, and it worked out better than she'd expected, really, at least until today.

At least until Gold Beach, only thirty or forty miles north of the California state line, where Crispin spotted the swan neck of a *Brachiosaurus* towering above shaggy hemlock branches, and he immediately started begging her to stop, even promised that he wouldn't ask her to play the PJ Harvey tape anymore if she'd Please Just Stop and let him see. So they lost an hour at the Prehistoric Gardens, actually paid money to get in, and then spent a whole fucking hour wandering around seventy acres of dripping, wet trees, listening to Crispin prattle on about the life-sized sculptures of dinosaurs and things like dinosaurs, tourist-trap monstrosities built sometime in the 1950s, skeletons of steel and wood hidden somewhere beneath sleek skins of wire mesh and cement.

"They don't even look real," Tam said, as Crispin vamped in front of a scowling stegosaur while Lark rummaged around in her purse for her tiny Instamatic camera.

"Well, they look real enough to *me*," he replied, and Lark just shrugged, a suspiciously complicit and not-at-all-helpful sort of shrug. Tam frowned a little harder, no bottom to a frown like hers. "You are really such a fucking geek, Crispy," she said under her breath, but plenty loud enough the twins could hear.

"Don't call him that," Lark snapped, defensive sister voice, and then she found her camera somewhere in the vast blackbeaded bag and aimed it at the pretty boy and the unhappy-looking stegosaur. "A geeky name for a geeky boy," Tam sneered, as Lark took his picture. Crispin winked at her, then, and he was off again, running fast to see the *Pteranodon* or the *Ankylosaurus*. Tam looked down at her wristwatch and up at the sky and, finding no solace in either, she followed zombie Hansel and zombie Gretel away through the trees.

After the Prehistoric Gardens, it was Lark's turn, of course, her infallible logic that it wasn't fair to stop for Crispin and then not stop for her, and, anyway, all she wanted was to have her picture taken beside one of the giant redwoods. Hardly even inside the national park, and she already had that shitty little camera out again, sneaky rectangle of woodgrain plastic and Hello Kitty stickers.

And because it was easier to just pull the fuck over than listen to her snivel and pout all the way to San Francisco, the car bounced off the highway into a small turn-around, rolled over a shallow ditch and across

snapping twigs. Lark's door was open before Tam even shifted the Impala into park, and Crispin piled out of the back seat after her. Then, insult to inconvenience, they made Tam take the photograph: the pair of them, arm in arm and wickedsmug grins on their matching faces, a mat of dry cinnamon-colored needles beneath their boots and the boles of the great sequoias rising up behind them, primeval frame of ferns and underbrush snarl all around.

Tam sighed loud and breathed in a mouthful of air so clean it hurt her Angeleno lungs, and she wished she had a cigarette. *Just get it the fuck over with,* she thought, stern and patient thought for herself. But she made sure to aim the camera just low enough to cut the tops off both their heads in the photo.

Halfway back to the car, a small squeal of surprise and delight from Lark. "*What*?" Crispin asked, "What is it?" Lark stooped and picked up something from the rough bed of redwood needles.

"Just get in the goddamned car, okay?" Tam begged, but Lark wasn't listening, held her discovery out for Crispin to see, presented for his approval. He made a face that was equal parts disgust and alarm and took a step away from Lark and the pale yellow thing in her hands.

"*Yuck,*" he sneered. "Put it back down, Lark, before it bites you or stings you or something."

"Oh, it's only a banana slug, you big sissy," she said and frowned like she was trying to impersonate Tam. "See? It can't hurt you," and she stuck it right under Crispin's nose.

"*Gagh,*" he moaned. "It's *huge,*" and he headed for the car, climbed into the backseat and hid in the shadows.

"It's only a banana slug," Lark said again. "I'm gonna keep him for a pet and name him Chiquita."

"You're going to put down the worm and get back in the fucking car," Tam said, standing at the rear fender and rattling Magwitch's key ring in one hand like a particularly noisy pair of dice. "Either that, Lark, or I'm going to leave your skinny ass standing out here with the bears."

"And the sasquatches!" Crispin shouted from inside the car. Tam silenced him with a glare through the rear windshield.

"Jesus, Tam. It's not gonna *hurt* anything. Really. I'll put it in my purse, okay? It's not gonna hurt anything if it's inside my purse, right?" But

Tam narrowed her eyes and jabbed a finger at the ground, at the needle-littered space between herself and Lark.

"You're going to put the motherfucking worm *down*, on the ground," she growled, "and then you're going to get back in the motherfucking car."

Lark didn't move, stared stubbornly down at the fat slug as it crawled cautiously over her right palm, leaving a wide trail of sparkling slime on her skin. "No," she said.

"*Now*, Lark."

"No," Lark repeated, glancing up at Tam through the cascade of her white bangs. "It won't hurt anything."

Just two short, quick steps and Tam was on top of her, almost a head taller, anyway, and her teeth bared like all the grizzly bears and sasquatches in the world.

"Stop!" Lark screeched. "Crispin, make her stop!" She tried too late to turn and run away, but Tam already had what she wanted, had already snatched it squirming from Lark's sticky hands, and Chiquita the banana slug went sailing off into the trees. It landed somewhere among the ferns and mossy, rotting logs with a very small but audible *thump*.

"Now," Tam said, smiling and wiping slug slime off her hand onto the front of Lark's black Switchblade Symphony T-shirt. "Get in the car. *Pretty* please."

And for a moment, the time it took Tam to get behind the wheel and give the engine a couple of loud, warning revs, Lark stood, staring silently towards the spot in the woods where the slug had come down. She might have cried, if she hadn't known that Tam really would leave her stranded there. The third rev brought a big puff of sooty exhaust from the Impala's noisy muffler, and Lark was already opening the passenger-side door, already slipping in beside Tam.

She was quiet for a while, staring out at the forest and the stingy glimpses of rocky coastline, still close enough to tears that Tam could see the wet shimmer in the window-trapped reflection of her blue eyes.

So the highway carries them south, between the ocean and the weathered western slopes of the Klamath Mountains, over rocks from the time of Crispin's dinosaurs, rocks laid down in warm and serpent-haunted seas; out of the protected cathedral stands of virgin redwood, into hills and gorges where the sequoias are forced to rub branches with less privileged

trees, mere Douglas fir and hemlock and oak. And gradually their view of the narrow, dark beaches becomes more frequent, the sharp and towering headlands setting them one from another like sedimentary parentheses.

Tam driving fast, fast as she dares, not so much worried about cops and speeding tickets as losing control in one of the hairpin curves and plunging ass-over-tits into the fucking scenery, taking a dive off one of the narrow bridges and it's two hundred feet straight down. She chain smokes and has started playing harder music, digging through the shoe box full of pirated cassettes for Nine Inch Nails and Front 242, Type-O Negative and Nitzer Ebb, all the stuff that Lark and Crispin would probably be whining like drowning kittens about if they didn't know how pissed off she was already. And then the car starts making a sound like someone's tossed a bucket of nails beneath the hood and the temp light flashes on. Screw you, Tam, here's some more shit to fuck up your wonderful fucking afternoon by the fucking sea.

"It's not supposed to do that, is it?" Crispin asks, backseat coy, and she really wants to turn around, stick a finger through one of his eyes until she hits brain.

"*No*, Einstein," she says instead. "It's not supposed to do that. Now shut up," settling for such a weak little jab instead of fresh frontal lobe beneath her nails. The motor spits up a final, grinding cough and dies, leaves her coasting, drifting into the breakdown lane. Pavement traded for rough and pinging gravel. Tam lets the right fender scrape along the guardrail almost twenty feet before she stomps the brakes, the smallest possible fraction of her rage expressed in the squeal of metal against metal; when the Impala has finally stopped moving, she puts on the emergency brake and shifts into park, then turns on the hazard lights.

"We can't just stop *here*," Lark says, and she sounds scared, almost, staring out at the sun beginning to set above the endless Pacific horizon. "I mean, there isn't even a here *to* stop at. And, before long, it'll be getting dark – "

"Yeah, well, you tell that to Magwitch's fine hunk of Detroit dogshit here, baby cakes," and Tam opens her door, slamming it closed behind her, and leaves the twins staring at each other in silent, astonished panic.

Lark tries to open her door, then, but it's jammed smack up against the guardrail and there's not enough room to squeeze out, just three or four scant inches, and that's not even space for the sharp angles of her waif's

bony shoulders. So, she slides across the faded green naugahyde, accidentally knocks the box of tapes over, and they spill in a loud clatter across the seat and into the floorboard. She sits behind the wheel while Crispin climbs over from the backseat. Tam's standing in front of the car now, staring furiously down at the hood.

Crispin whispers, "If you let off the brake, maybe we could run over her," and Lark reaches beneath the dash like maybe it's not such a bad idea, but she only pulls the hood release.

"She'd live, probably," Lark says. "Yeah," Crispin replies, and begins to gather up the scattered cassettes and return them to the dingy shoe box.

The twins sit together on the guardrail while Tam curses the traitorous, hissing car, curses her ignorance of wires and rubber belts and radiators, and curses absent Magwitch for owning the crappy old Impala in the first place.

"He said it runs hot sometimes, and to just let it cool off," Crispin says hopefully, but she shuts him up with a razorshard glance. So he holds Lark's hand and stares at a bright patch of California poppies growing on the other side of the rail, a tangerine puddle of blossoms waving heavy calyx heads in the salt and evergreen breeze. A few minutes more and Lark and Crispin both grow bored with Tam's too-familiar indignation, tiresome rerun of a hundred other tantrums, and they slip away together into the flowers.

"It's probably not as bad as she's making it out to be," Crispin says, picking a poppy and slipping the stem behind Lark's right ear. "It just needs to cool off."

"Yeah," Lark says. "Probably," but not sounding reassured at all, and Lark stares down the precarious steep slope towards the beach, sand the cinder color of cold apocalypse below the grey shale and sandstone bluff. She also picks a poppy and puts it in Crispin's hair, tucking it behind his left ear, so they match again. "I want to look for sea shells," she says "and driftwood," and she points at a narrow trail just past the poppies. Crispin looks back at Tam once, her black hair wild in the wind, her face in her hands like maybe she's even crying, and then he follows Lark.

Mostly just mussels, long shells darker than the beach, curved and flaking like diseased toenails, but Lark puts a few in her purse, anyway. Crispin finds a single crab claw, almost as orange as the poppies in their

hair, with an airbrush hint of blue, and she keeps that, too. The driftwood is more plentiful, but all the really good pieces are gigantic, the warped and polished bones of great trees washed down from the mountains and scattered about here, shattered skeletons beyond repair. They walk on warm sand and a thick mat of sequoia bark and spindle twigs, fleshy scraps of kelp, and follow the flotsam to a stream running down to meet the gently crashing sea, wide and shallow interface of saltwater and fresh. Overhead, seagulls wheel and protest the intrusion. The craggy rocks just offshore are covered with their watchful numbers, powder-grey feathers, white feathers, beaks for snatching fish. *And pecking out eyes*, Lark thinks. They squawk and stare, and she gives them the finger, one nail chewed down to the quick and most of the black polish flaked away.

Crispin bends and lets the stream gurgle about his pale hands. It's filled with polished stones, muted olive and bottle-green pebbles rounded by their centuries in the cold water. He puts one finger to his lips and licks it cautiously. "Sweet," he says. "It's very sweet."

"What's that?" Lark asks, pointing, and he looks up, across the stream at a wind-stunted stand of firs on the other side and there's a sign there, almost as big as a roadside billboard sign and just as gaudy. But no way anyone could see this from the highway. A great sign of planks painted white and lettered crimson, artful, scrolling letters that spell out, ALIVE AND UNTAMED! MONSTERS AND MYSTERIES OF NEPTUNE'S BOSOM! and below, in slightly smaller script, MERMAIDS AND MIRACLES! THE GREAT SEA SERPENT! MEN-EATERS AND DEVILFISH!

"Someone likes exclamation points," Lark says, but Crispin's already halfway across the stream, walking on the knobby stones protruding from the water; she follows him, both arms out for balance like a trapeze acrobat.

"Wait," she calls to him, and, reluctantly, he pauses until she catches up.

The old house trailer sits a little distance up the slope from the beach, just far enough that it's safe from the high tides. Lark and Crispin stand side by side, holding hands tight, and stare at it, lips parted and eyes wide enough to divulge a hint of their mutual surprise. Lark's left boot is wet where she missed a stone and her foot went into the stream, and the water's beginning to seep past leather straps and buckles, through her hose. But she

doesn’t notice, or it doesn’t matter, because this is that unexpected. This old husk of sunbleached aluminum walls, corrugated metal skin draped in mop-grey folds of fishing net, so much netting it’s hard to see that the trailer underneath might once have been blue. Like something a giant fisherman dragged up from the sea, and finally, realizing what he had, this inedible hunk of rubbish, he left it here for the gulls and the weather to take care of.

“Wow,” Lark whispers, and Crispin turns, looking over his shoulder to see if maybe Tam has given up on the car and come looking for them. But there’s only the beach, and the waves, and the birds. The air that smells like dead fish and salt wind, and Crispin asks, “You wanna go see?”

“There might be a phone,” Larks says, still whispering. “If there’s a phone, we could call someone to fix the car.”

“Yeah,” Crispin replies, as though they really need an excuse beyond their curiosity. There are more signs leading up to the trailer, splintery bread crumbs teasing them to take the next step, and the next, and the next after that: the mouth that swallowed jonah! and eternal leviathan and charybdis revealed! As they get close they can see other things in the sandy rind of yard surrounding the trailer: the rusting hulks of outboard motors and a ship’s wheel nailed to a post, broken lobster cages and the ivory-white jaws of sharks strung up to dry like toothy laundry. There are huge plywood and canvas façades leaned or hammered against the trailer, one on either side of the narrow door and both taller than the roof: garish seascapes with white-fanged sea monsters breaking the surface, acrylic foam and spray, flailing fins like Japanese fans of flesh and wire, eyes like angry, boiling hemorrhages.

A sudden gust off the beach, then, and they both have to stop and cover their eyes against the blowing sand. The wind clatters and whistles around all the things in the yard, tugging at the sideshow canvases.

“Maybe we should go back now,” Lark says when the wind has passed, and she brushes sand from her clothes and hair. “She’ll wonder where we’ve gone.”

“Yeah,” Crispin says, his voice grown thin and distant, distracted. “Maybe,” he says, but they’re both still climbing the slope, past the hand-lettered signs and into the ring of junk. Crispin pauses before the shark jaws, yawning cartilage jaws on nylon fishing line, and he runs the tip of one finger lightly across rows of gleaming, serrate triangles. Only a little more pressure and he could draw blood.

And then the door of the trailer creaks open and a man is standing in the dark space leading inside, not what either expected if only because they hadn't known what to expect. A tall man, gangly knees and elbows through threadbare clothes, pants and shirt the same faded khaki; bony wrists from buttoned sleeves too short for his long arms, arthritis-swollen knuckles on his wide hands. Lark makes a uneasy sound when she sees him, and Crispin jerks his hand away from the shark's jaw, sneak-child caught in the cookie jar startled, and snags a pinkie, the soft skin torn, and he leaves a gleaming crimson drop of himself behind.

"You be careful, boy," the man says with a voice like water sloshing in a rocky place. "That's *Carcharodon carcharias* herself hanging there, and her ghost is just as hungry as her living belly ever was. You've given her a taste of blood, and she'll remember now."

"Our car broke down," Lark says to the man, looking up at his face for the first time since the door opened. "And we saw the signs." She points back down the hill without looking away from the man, his cloudy eyes that seem too big for his skull, an odd, forward-sloping skull with more of an under bite than she ever thought possible and a worm-pink wrinkle where his lower lip should be, nothing at all to pass for the upper lip. Eyes set too far apart, wide nostrils too far apart and a scraggly bit of grey beard perched on the end of his sharp chin. Lank hair to his shoulders and almost as grey as the scrap of beard.

"You two want to see what's inside, then?" he asks, that watery voice. Lark and Crispin both look back towards the signs, the little stream cutting the beach in half. There's no evidence of Tam anywhere.

"Does it cost money?" Crispin asks, glances tentatively out at the man from underneath the white shock of hair hiding half his face.

"Not if you ain't got any," the man replies and blinks once, vellum lids winking fast across those bulging eyes.

"It's getting late, and our car's broken down," Lark says, and the man makes a noise that might be a sigh or might be a cough.

"It don't take long," he tells her and smiles, showing crooked teeth the color of nicotine stains.

"And you've got all the things that those signs say, in there?" Crispin asks, one eyebrow cocked, eager, excited doubt. The man shrugs.

"If it's free, I don't expect you'll be asking for your money back," as if that's an answer, but it's enough for Crispin. He nods his head and steps

towards the door, away from the shark jaws. But Lark grabs his hand, anxious grab that says, “Wait,” without using any words. When he looks at her, he sees eyes that say, *This isn’t like the dinosaurs, whatever it is, this isn’t plaster and plywood,* and so he smiles for her, flashing comfort and confidence.

“It’ll be something cool,” he says. “Better than listening to Tam bitch at us about the car, at least.”

So she smiles back at him, small and nervous smile, but she squeezes his hand a little harder.

“Come on, if you’re coming,” the man says. “I’m letting in the flies, standing here with the door wide open.”

“Hold on,” Crispin says. “We’re coming,” and the man holds the door for them, steps to one side, and the trailer swallows them like a hungry metal whale.

Inside, the air is chilly and smells like fish and stagnant saltwater, mildew, and there’s the faintest rotten odor somewhere underneath, like a dead thing washed up and swelling on the sand. Crispin and Lark pause while the man pulls the door shut behind them, shutting them in, shutting the world out.

“Do you live in here?” Lark asks, still squeezing Crispin’s hand, and the old man turns around, the tall old man with his billy-goat beard. He gazes down at the twins as he scratches at the scaly, dry skin on his neck.

“I have myself a cot in the back, and a hot plate,” he replies. Lark nods. Her eyes are adjusting to the dim light leaking in through the dirty windowpanes, and she can see flakes of dead skin, dislodged by his fingers and floating slowly down to settle on the dirty linoleum floor of the trailer.

The length of the trailer has been lined with wooden shelves and huge glass tanks, and there are sounds to match the smells, *wet* sounds, the constant bubble of aquarium pumps, water filters, occasional, furtive splashes.

“Wonders from the blackest depths,” the old man sighs, wheezes, tired and sickly imitation of a carnie barker’s spiel. “Jewels and nightmares plucked from Davy Jones’ Locker, washed up on the shores of the Seven Seas – ”

The old man is interrupted by a violent fit of coughing, then, and Crispin steps up to the nearest shelf, a collection of jars, dozens and dozens

of jars filled with murky ethanol or formalin, formaldehyde gone weak-tea brown and the things that float lifelessly inside: scales and spines, oyster-grey flesh and lidless, unseeing eyes like pickled grapes. Labels on the jars, identities in a fine, spidery handwriting, and the paper so old and yellow he knows that it would crumble at his most careful touch.

The old man clears his throat, loud, phlegmy rattle, and spits into a corner.

“Secrets from the world’s museums, from Mr. Charles Darwin’s own cabinets, scooped from the sea off Montevideo in eighteen hundred and thirty-two.”

“Is that an octopus?” Lark asks. The twins both stare into one of the larger jars, three or four gallons and a warty lump sealed inside, a bloom of tentacles squashed against the glass like something wanting out. Crispin presses the tip of one finger to the glass, tracing the outline of a single, dime-wide suction cup.

The old man coughs again, throaty raw hack, produces a wadded and wrinkled, snot-stained handkerchief from his shirt pocket, and wipes at his wide mouth with it.

“*That*, boy, is the larva of the Kraken, the greatest of the cephalopods, Viking-bane, ten strangling arms to hale dragon ships beneath the waves.” And then the old man clears his throat, and, in a different voice, barker turned poet, recites, “*Below the thunders of the upper deep, far, far beneath in the abysmal sea, his ancient, dreamless, uninvaded sleep the Kraken sleepeth.*”

“Tennyson,” Lark says, and the old man nods, pleased.

Crispin leans closer, squinting through the gloom and dusty glass, the clouded preserving fluids, and now he can see something dark and sharp like a parrot’s beak nested at the center of the rubbery mass of mollusk flesh. But then they’re being hurried along, past all the unexamined specimens, and here’s the next stop on the old man’s tour.

Beneath a bell jar, the taxidermied head and arms and torso of a monkey sewn onto the dried tail of a fish, the stitches plain to see, but he tells them it’s a baby mermaid, netted near the coast of Java, a hundred years ago.

“It’s just half a dead old monkey with a fishtail stuck on,” Crispin says, impertinent, already tiring of these moldy, fabricated wonders. “See?” and he points at the stitches in case Lark hasn’t noticed them for herself.

The old man makes an fractious sound, not quite anger, but impatience, certainly, and he moves them quickly along, this time to a huge fish tank, plate-glass sides so entirely overgrown with algae there's no seeing what's inside, just mossy green like siren hair that sways in whatever dull currents the aquarium's pump is making.

"I can't see anything at all in *there*," Crispin says, as Lark looks nervously back past the fake mermaid towards the trailer door. But Crispin stands on his toes, peers over the edge of the tank. "You need to put some snails in there," he says. "To eat some of that green shit so people can see."

"*This* one has no name, no *proper* name," the old man croaks through his snot-clogged throat. "No legend. This one was scraped off the hull of a Russian whaler with the shipworms and barnacles. On Midsummer's Eve, put an ear to the glass and you'll hear it *singing* in the language of riptides and typhoons."

Something in the tank seems to move, then, maybe, beyond the emerald scum, feathery red gill-flutter or a thousand jointed legs the color of a burn, and Crispin jumps, steps away from the glass and lets go of Lark's hand. Smug grin on the old man's long face to show his yellowed teeth, and he makes a barking noise like seals or laughing, or seals laughing.

"You go back, if you're getting scared," the old man says, and Lark looks like that's all she wants in the world right now, to be out of the trailer, back on the beach and headed up the cliff to the Impala. But Crispin seizes her hand again, this very same boy that's afraid of banana slugs, but something here he has to see, and something he has to prove to himself or to the self-satisfied old man.

"What's next, sea monkeys?" he asks, defiantly, mock-brave.

"Right here," the old man says, pointing to something more like a cage than a tank. "The illegitimate spawn of the Great Sea Serpent and a Chinese water dragon." There's a sloppy construction of planks and chicken wire on the floor, almost as tall as the twins, and Crispin drags Lark along towards it.

"Tam will be looking for us, won't she?" Lark asks, but he ignores her, stares instead into the enclosure. There's muddy straw on the bottom and motionless coils of taut gold and chocolate-brown muscle.

"Jesus, it's just a stupid python, Lark. See? It's not even as big as the one that Miss Alexandra used to have. What a rip-off – " and then he stops.

Because the snake moves, shifting its chain-link bulk, and now he can see its head, the tiny horns above its pearlbead eyes, and farther back, a single, stubby flap of meat along one side of its body that beats nervously at the air a moment and then lies still against the filthy straw.

"There's something wrong with it, Crispin, that's all. It's deformed," Lark says, argument to convince herself, and the old man says, "She can crush a full-grown pig in those coils, or a man," and he pauses for the drama, then adds, resuming his confident barker cadence, sly voice to draw midway crowds – "Kept inside a secret Buddhist monastery on the Yangtze and worshipped for a century, gettin' all the sacrificial children she could eat," he says.

The flipper thing on its side moves again, vestigial limb rustle against the straw, and the snake flicks a tongue the color of gangrene and draws its head slowly back into its coils, retreating, hiding from their sight or the dim trailer light, or both. "Wonders from the blackest depths," the old man whispers. "Mysteries of the deep, spoils of the abyss."

And Lark is all but begging, now. "*Please*, Crispin. We should go." But her voice almost lost in the burbling murmur of aquarium filters.

Crispin's hand about her wrist like a steel police cuff, and she thinks, *How much more can there be, how much can this awful little trailer hold?* When she looks back the way they've come, past the snake thing's cage and the green tank and the phony mermaid, past all the jars, it seems a long, long way; the dizzying impression that the trailer's somehow bigger inside than out, and she shivers, realizes that she's sweating, clammy coldsweat in tiny salt beads on her upper lip, across her forehead and leaking into her eyes. *How much more?* but there's at least *one* more, and they step past a plastic shower curtain, slick blue plastic printed with cartoon sea horses and starfish and turtles, to stand before the final exhibit in the old man's shabby menagerie.

"Dredged from the bottom of Eel Canyon off Humboldt Bay, hauled up five hundred fathoms through water so inky black and cold it might be the very moment before Creation itself." Crispin is staring at something Lark can't see, squinting into the last tank. Cold air pools about Lark's ankles, one dry and one still wet from the stream, a sudden, tangible chill that gathers itself like the old man's words, or like heavy air spilling from an open freezer door.

“And this was just a *scrap*, boy, a *shred* ripped from the haunches or seaweed-crusted skull of a behemoth.”

“I can’t see anything,” Crispin says, but then he gasps, “*Oh*. Oh shit. Oh, Jesus.”

Lark realizes where the cold is coming from, that it’s pouring out from under the shower curtain, and finally she slips her hand free of Crispin’s grasp. He doesn’t even seem to notice, can’t seem to stop staring into the murky, ill-lit tank that towers over them, filling the rear of the trailer from wall to wall.

“Just *maybe*,” the old man says, bending very close, and he’s almost whispering to Crispin now, secrets and suspicions for the boy twin and no one else. “Maybe it’s growing itself a whole new body in there, a whole new organism from that stolen bit of flesh, like the arm of a starfish that gets torn off and keeps on living.”

Lark touches the folds of the curtain, and the cold presses back from the other side. Cold that would burn her hand if she left it there, if she lingered long enough. She glances back at the old man and Crispin to be sure they’re not watching, because she knows this must be forbidden, something she’s not meant to see. Then she pulls one corner of the shower curtain aside, and that terrible cold flows out, washing over her like a wave of Arctic breath and a neglected cat-box smell and another, sharper odor like cabbage left too long at the bottom of a refrigerator.

“Fuck,” Crispin says behind her. “No fucking way.” The old man is reciting Tennyson again.

“*There hath he lain for ages, and will lie, battening upon huge sea worms in his sleep, until the latter fire shall heat the deep – ”*

There is dark behind the shower curtain, dark like a wall, solid as the cold, and again, that vertigo sense of a vast space held somehow inside the little trailer, that this blackness might go on for miles. That she could step behind the curtain and spend her life wandering lost in the perpetual night collected here.

“*Then once by man and angels to be seen,*” the old man says, somewhere back there in the world, where there is simple light and warmth. “*In roaring he shall rise and on the surface die.*”

Far off, in the dark ahead of her, there are wet sounds, something breaking the surface of water that has lain so still so long, and she can feel its eyes on her then, eyes made to see where light is a fairy tale and the sun

a murmured heresy. The sound of something vast and sinuous coming slowly through the water towards her, and Crispin says, “It *moved*, didn’t it? Jesus, it fucking moved in there.”

It’s so close now, Lark thinks. *It’s so close and this is the worst place in the world and I* should *be scared, I should be scared shitless.*

“It does that sometimes,” the old man says. “In its sleep, sometimes it moves.”

Lark steps over the threshold, the thin, tightrope line between the trailer and this place, ducks her head beneath the shower curtain, and the smell is stronger than ever now. It gags her, and she covers her mouth with one hand, another step and the curtain will close behind her, and there will be nothing but this perfect, absolute cold and darkness and her and the thing swimming through the black. Not really water in there, she knows, just *black* to hide it from the prying, jealous light – and then Crispin has her hand again, is pulling her back into the blinding glare of the trailer and the shower curtain falls closed with an unforgiving, disappointed *shoosh*. The old man and his fishlong face is staring at her with his rheumy, accusing eyes.

“That was not for you, girl,” he says. “I did not show you that.”

She wrenches her hand free of Crispin’s and almost manages to slip back behind the curtain before anyone can stop her, the only possible release from the sudden, empty feeling eating her up inside, like waking from a dream of Heaven or someone dead alive again, the glimpse of anything so pure and then it’s yanked away. But Crispin is stronger and the old man is blocking her, anyhow, grizzled Cerberus standing guard before the aquamarine plastic, a faint string of drool at one corner of his mouth.

“Come on, Lark,” Crispin says to her. “We shouldn’t be here. We shouldn’t ever have come in here.”

The look in the old man’s eyes says he’s right, and already the dream is fading, whatever she might have seen or heard already bleeding away in the last, watercolor dregs of daylight getting into the trailer.

“I’m sorry,” Crispin says as they pass the shriveled mermaid, and he pushes the door open, not so far back after all. “I didn’t want you to think I was afraid.”

“No,” she says. “No,” but doesn’t know what to say next, and it doesn’t really matter, because now they’re stumbling together down the

trailer's concrete-block steps, their feet in the sand again. The air is filled with gentle twilight and the screaming of gulls.

Tam has been standing by the stream for half an hour, at least that long since she wandered down to the beach looking for the twins, after the man in the pickup truck stopped and fixed the broken fan belt with an old pair of pantyhose from the back seat of the Impala and then refilled the radiator. "You take it easy, now, and that ought'a hold far as San Francisco," he said. Then she couldn't find Lark or Crispin. Her throat hurts from calling them. It's nearly dark now, and she's been standing here where their footprints end at the edge of the water, the past thirty minutes spent shouting their names. Getting angrier, getting fucking scared, the relief that the car's running again melting away, deserting her for visions of the twins drowned or the twins lost or the twins raped and murdered.

Twice she started across the stream, one foot out and plenty enough stones between her and the other side to cross without getting her feet wet. Twice she stopped, thinking that maybe she glimpsed dark shapes moving just below the surface, undulating forms like the wings of stingreys or the tentacles of an octopus or squid, black and eel-long things darting between the rocks. Never mind that the water is crystal clear and couldn't possibly be more than a few inches deep. Never mind she *knows* it's really nothing more than shadow tricks and the last glimmers of the setting sun caught in the rippling stream. These apprehensions too instinctual, the thought of what might be waiting for her if she slipped, sharp teeth eager for stray ankles, anxiety all but too deep to question. So she's stood here, feeling stupid, calling them like she was their goddamn mother.

She looks up again and there they are, almost stumbling down the hill, the steep dirt path leading down from the creepy old trailer, Crispin in the lead, dragging Lark along, a cloud of dust trailing out behind them. When they reach the stream they don't even bother with the stepping stones, just splash their way straight across, splashing Tam in the bargain.

"Mother*fucker*," she says and steps backwards onto drier sand. "Will you please watch what the fuck you're doing? Shit." But neither twin says a word, just stands breathless at the edge of the stream, the low bank carved into the sand by the water; Crispin stares down at his soggy Docs, and Lark glances nervously back towards the trailer on the hill.

“Where the hell have you two bozos been? Didn’t you hear me calling you? I’m fucking hoarse from calling you.”

“An old man,” Lark gasps. “A terrible old man.” wheezing the words out. Before she can say anything else, Crispin adds, “A sideshow, Tam, that’s all.” He’s speaking quickly, like he’s afraid of what Lark will say if he doesn’t, what she might have been about to say. He adds, “Just some crazy old guy with a sort of a sideshow.”

“Jesus,” Tam sighs, tired and pissy sigh that she hopes sounds the way she feels, and she reaches out and snatches a wilted poppy from Crispin’s hair, tossing it to the sand at their feet. “That figures, you know? That just fucking figures. Next time, Magwitch comes or your asses stay home.” She turns her back on them, then, heading up the beach towards the car. She only stops once, turns around to be sure they’re following, and they are, close behind and their arms tight around one another’s shoulders as if they couldn’t make it alone. The twins’ faces are hidden in shadow, night-shrouded, and behind them, the sea has turned a cold, silvery indigo and stretches away to meet the rising stars.

Postcards from the King of Tides

Christa Faust and I on the 101 from Florence, Oregon to Fortuna, California in the Spring of 1997, past Winchester Bay, Coos Bay, Gold Beach and E. V. Nelson’s Prehistoric Gardens, redwoods, black sea cliffs, tracing the western shadow of the Klamath Mountains. Somewhere (and I wish I knew precisely where), I found the very spot where this story takes place, even if there was no old man with his sideshow oceanic house trailer. I have a single green stone on my desk, which I took away from that stream Tam and the twins crossed.

Giants in the Earth

For no particular reason that the Iron Orchid can recall, she has waited until her birth son, her beaming womb fruit, precious Jherek, is seven years old to present him, formally, at a soirée. By fits and starts, he has grown as normally as she can guess the course of such things should occur, and it hardly matters that she chose to forego the niceties and fluids of gestation, belly-swollen months, opted instead for the fern-shaded incubator while she scuttled across the glass bead and jade silk floors of silent and custom-made seas. Matters less, even, that the dome of plexibrass and the most transparent crystal mercury nursed the baby with its own glistening set of rubber nipples. He is nonetheless the pride of her cells, the mysterious multiplication of her genetic self, fused with the wriggling, sperm-born matter of his beautiful, nameless father. Such bright perfection from so crude a coupling, their giggling, joyously clumsy attempts to decode the ins and outs of that Dawn Age ritual, shadowed by the whispering old bones of Shanalorm.

“No, dear,” she laughed, his three-headed penis (it had seemed right enough at the time) slipping into the bristling slit between her shoulder blades. “Not *that* way, dearest thing. *Here*.”

So it is not as if she has held him back from any shame, not as if they haven’t picnicked with Li Pao and Lord Jagged and the ebullient Sweet Orb Mace. Not as if he has not been cradled and bounced on the knee of the Duke of Queens.

Jherek, golden-eyed tonight although she’d have preferred something silver; white, white hair sleek and tied back from his face with the claws of something found and cracked neat between his curious teeth. His naked skin like an artifice, too smooth, too flawless, to be the product of mere biology.

“What will I wear, Mother?” he asks, because she has not tired of the appellation yet. “What would you *have* me wear, sweetest, hardest Mother?”

The Iron Orchid thinks for one impatient moment, runs gilded fingertips across her third bottom canine, before she twists the sapphire ring, slightest motion, and the new gown hangs in the jasmine and diesel-

scented air of the room that Jherek has built from wood the color of pomegranate seeds. Salmon velvet, softer even than his skin, billowing sleeves, Formica cuff links and a high, stiff collar that looks like platinum. Jherek's face glows, and he adds a jabot of seaweed lace and a tiger's eye brooch.

He will wear nothing at all on his feet, still, but powders them to match the gown.

"Tell me again, absolute Mother, about Below-The-Lake and the beetlebats," he pleads and she has to smile, because she has made this demanding beauty, because he has filled something inside her hearts.

"Better we go ahead now, Jherek, or we may not be late," she says.

Jherek Carnelian walks silent beside the Iron Orchid in the glittering travertine halls beneath Lake Billy the Kid, hands clasped, because otherwise they would not be still. The ceiling of this tunnel, vaulted path between one waterfall gateway and the great cavern to come, is close enough that he can see the iridescent black-green carapaces of the beetlebats for himself; bodies hung head downward in the pulsing violet light from the subterranean fungi decorating the walls in teardrop paisley swirls. He stomps his bare foot and the small fleshsound disturbs them so that they flutter their chitin wings, a crisp sound like breaking ice that makes him laugh.

And then the tunnel spills them out into the cavern, its stalactites at least a thousand feet overhead. There is gentle applause, though whether it is for him, or the Iron Orchid, or both he cannot tell. The cavern is startling ebon, onyx and obsidian arches and Texan gargoyle spires, veils of mourning gauze, inky curtains of mummy-shroud muslin. Corpseless necropolis, a hundred styles of crypts, and mausolea, and sealed sarcophagi defying blameless gravity.

My Lady Charlotina greets them immediately. Jherek has met her only once before, on a three-day hunt for nothing important in a primeval forest of pines and apricot mangroves created especially for the occasion by Lord Jagged. When nothing important had actually been found, she was disappointed, he remembers, disseminated the whole wood without bothering to ask if Jagged minded.

"Oh," she says through slick black lips. "He is most certainly everything a child born of your exquisite assembly should be, my industrial

Orchid. *Everything*."

My Lady Charlotina is dressed in a skin-tight body suit of latex (a marine animal the Iron Orchid has described to him in every detail), with cuffs and collars of polished cuttlebone. The neckline plunges to emphasize the new breast she has set above her sternum. Her smooth and navelless belly, not scarred like Jherek's by his skin's umbilical memories, has been carefully studded with needle rubies.

"Loveliest of breathing troglodytes," the Iron Orchid says, leaning close to My Lady Charlotina, whispering, but he can hear anyway, catches the hint of pleasurable annoyance in her voice. "I *thought* you'd settled on a Baroque tribute to the Eleventh Equatorial Glaciation for your theme."

"Oh, yes, well," says My Lady Charlotina, smiling, "I had, originally, but then I thought of this at the *last* possible minute, the Four Year Empire, of course. Isn't it so much better?"

"Surely," the Iron Orchid says. "But you might have informed the guests of honor, so that costumes would be more suitably dire." She twists a power ring so that her white chrome bruises to deepest indigo.

"Oh, but you should let the child be," says My Lady Charlotina, running one latex hand lovingly over the Iron Orchid's hull. "He's a matchless contrast, the unconditional center of all our attentions."

"Jherek?" his mother asks. "Would you prefer to change your gown?" But he's busy staring up at one of the languid funeral ships sweeping slowly by overhead, its leathery wings rising and falling, its black sails billowed by unfelt gales. The sunken, oyster-grey faces of the sailors stare back down at him, expressionless regard.

"Jherek dear, harvest of my self," she says, and he looks back to the Iron Orchid and My Lady Charlotina.

"Yes, Mother?"

"Do you wish to change your costume, to harmonize with the period My Lady Charlotina has belatedly chosen as her theme?"

"Or," My Lady Charlotina chimes in, "would you remain dressed in this marvelous affair, so that everyone might see you from the farthest corners of the hall?"

He looks up again, but the funeral ship has passed them by. "This is perfectly fine, Mother. After all, I want them *all* to see me."

Tall Lord Jagged steps from the crowd, then, granite eyes and a greyer cloak of authentic selkie-hide, all black silk underneath and knuckle bones

strung on catgut.

“Ah,” he says, wide and comforting smile, “sweet and forge-tempered Orchid. I trust you will not have too much trouble adjusting to our host’s whimsy?”

“Of course not,” and the Iron Orchid whispers to him, “The inconvenience is delicious. But be truthful, Jagged, our beloved, dismal Werther certainly had his hand in My Lady Charlotina’s change of heart, did he not?”

“Which hand do you mean, in particular, most luscious monocotyledon?” he replies, because young Werther de Goethe, whose natural birth was not nearly so fortunate as Jherek Carnelian’s, is still in the process of settling on a precise and desirable number of arms.

Jherek cranes his head far back, gold eyes wide and open-mouthed gawking, more intrigued by the simulbasalt skulls and vertebrae-encrusted tiers of Four Year Imperial Hypergoth architecture than the Iron Orchid’s queries. Hovering panoramas, glass stained a million somber shades with pigments ground and squeezed from blister and bone and bowel, ash-charred and blood-tinted; antimony solder and scabby frames of purest rust.

Occasionally, there are faces, as pale and drawn as the sailors’, and Jherek wonders if they’re genuine, maybe time travelers borrowed for the soirée from a score of menageries, or only clever fabrications.

“*Now*,” says My Lady Charlotina in her tinkling shard voice, “We simply cannot keep the *child* all to ourselves, can we?” And she takes his hand, takes his busy attention, and drags him away for her wild and calculated introductions.

Afterwards, after the praise of those Jherek has met before, too many times past counting, and faces new to him: Miss Una Persson and the chronographer Brannart Morphail (who has not yet affected his prestigious hump and clubfoot), the Everlasting Concubine and O’Kala Incarnadine, the Duke of Queens in his sticky robe of peacock candies, half a hundred others, at least, and all bearing lavish compliments and more lavish gifts.

He still sits on the throbbing dais of living slate, cross-legged in the uncomfortable récamier, bramble weave and fish-hide, where My Lady Charlotina put him. The crowd is drifting away, breaking up like a sky full of muttering clouds. Lord Jagged leans close, Jagged, who has given him nothing and so must have saved it for the very last.

“Come with me, pretty Jherek,” and Jherek is glad to be free at last of the prickly récamier, steps gingerly over and through the bundles and carbuncles and twittering things in denim baskets. Follows Lord Jagged past the buffet of quivering, tentacled period treats and delicacies. Jherek’s stomach rumbles, and he pauses, taking a pastry with restless millipede legs.

“Hurry yourself along,” Jagged says, eager urge. “I’m afraid I’m growing terribly impatient for you to see my gift.”

Jherek crunches through one end of the pastry and is surprised to find the gooey filling tastes pleasantly of rosemary and hyacinth, with vaguest bitter hint of wormwood.

“The Iron Orchid tells me that you’ve acquired a special, ah, *fascination* with 19th Century Dawn Age relics and culture.”

Jherek mumbles affirmation through the last bite of his pastry, which is dead now and losing some of its flavor.

“My Lady Charlotina insisted that I set it back here, out of sight of the guests, lest it spoil her illusions.”

They step through a final trefoil arch, brush aside gossamer and spider silk, and the shadows and murk, the rich swaths of gloom placed thoughtfully just so, are gone, and Jherek stands in warm sunlight, light filtered green-white through clear glass and foliage. He blinks, squinting as his pupils make their slow adjustments.

A very long and vaulted dome, cast iron and glass, so high and fragile that Jherek cannot imagine why it does not collapse under its own weight; set about the walls are galleries and arcades framed with marble and fibafome pillars. And laid straight down the center, a careful, riotous garden of trees and exotic shrubs, fig palms, and date ferns that stretch far up to the ceiling, graceful, drooping branches that exactly echo the curve of the dome. A crystal lagoon sparkling along one edge and the garden is alive, teems with lumbering beasts and things that flutter through the humid air, wriggle in the turquoise waters.

“Oh, Jagged,” he says and runs across flagstones to stand at the shining bronze rail that separates them from the garden. “Oh, it *is* marvelous, indeed! It is the best present ever! What exactly is it?”

“A Palaeozoic Museum,” Lord Jagged says and stands behind Jherek, his slender, alabaster hands on the boy’s shoulders. “I understand that they

were quite the rage during the reign of Nixon Kennedy II, menageries of primordial flora and fauna."

Jherek claps his small palms together – loud smack of childflesh against childflesh – frightening a flock of rooks and tiny rhamphorhynchi. The blackbirds and winged saurians rise squawking, midnight feathers and stiletto-beaked cloud, circling the dome, darting through the trees, drawing fresh gales of laughter from Jherek.

"I found some paintings and holograms in the rotted cities," says Lord Jagged. "An archive devoted to the history of the Dead Sciences, I believe."

There's a sudden roar, then, and a howl of pain. Jherek looks and sees the clumsy, rhino-nosed iguanodon, the instant before it hauls its scaly, quadrapedal bulk into a maroon grove of cedars. The giant ground sloth that pursues the dinosaur across the impeccable meadow roars again, drags itself forward with sickle claws, disappears after its prey.

"Of course, I'll have it transported back to your own house after the party," and Jagged sits down on a wrought cardboard bench, a perfect replica down to the faintly glowing neon detail.

"May I stay here?" Jherek asks. "I mean, surely I don't have to go back to the soirée instead."

"Of course," he says. "I can hardly blame you for tiring of all that tedious melancholy." He stands, then, goes to Jherek and bends to kiss the boy, their lips and tongues brushing, tasting one another. Lord Jagged runs his fingers through Jherek's white ponytail.

"No one could ever doubt the Iron Orchid is your mother, sweet Jherek."

And then Jagged pulls his charcoal cape tighter about his shoulders and steps back through the entrance of the Palaeozoic Museum, back into the must and pallor of My Lady Charlotina's Four Year Empire.

And Jherek is alone.

The walkway of flagstones and glazed ceramic tiles, Jherek has discovered, completely encircles the garden, gentle ellipse and no short stroll, all the way around. The air inside the Palaeozoic Museum is sultry and sticky hot, if he walks in the sun, and when he steps back into the shadows, cool as the halls of My Lady Charlotina's caverns. It smells of growing things, and quarried stone, and the spoor of creatures extinct a

hundred million years before Piltdown Man built his first primitive cities at Babylon and Muncie.

From the amber sandy shores of the lagoon, shallows awash with the spiral shells of Pre-Cambrian and Ordovician mollusks, pink clouds of trilobites and bronze-plated Devonian fishes, the garden rises, up through forgotten geological ages, to a grassy knoll where mastodons and a small herd of unicorns graze. The dark and tangled plots of jungle in between echo with deliciously frightful cries of life and death, sounds that prick Jherek's bare arms and back with goose bumps.

And Lord Jagged has decorated the walls of the Museum as well, the tidy cabinet of a proper 19th-Century geologist: quaintly ancient cases of oak and styroglass filled with the petrified bones of leviathans, the fossilized tracks of behemoths. Entire varnished skeletons of quartz and silica reassembled for his pleasure.

More than halfway round, Jherek comes upon a little bridge, an iron arch spanning a brook that exits the wall through the mouth of a stone porpoise and runs a short distance through a concrete sluice before joining the lagoon. He sits, winded, legs aching, but still as pleased as when he first laid eyes on Jagged's gift.

"You are my most fabulous friend," he says, as a brightly plumaged archaeopteryx lights on the bronze rail, meaning, of course, Lord Jagged and not the ur-bird. "Except for dear Mother."

Smallest splash then, and he peers down past his dangling legs, beneath the bridge and there's the girl, the only child he's ever seen besides his own reflection. She's ankle-deep in the gurgling brook, fending off a curious mesosaur with the toe of one soggy boot. Jherek recognizes her at once as one of My Lady Charlotina's Four Year fabrications. Her waxy complexion and skin like shriveled apple peel, grey eyes and raven, bone-threaded dreadlocks.

"Hello," he says, and she only takes her eyes off the little reptile long enough to aim a distressed half-smile his way. "Whatever are you *doing* under there?"

The mesosaur, sensing her distraction, its opportunity, leaps from the water like a salmon, snags needle-teeth into one stockinged leg and the girl slaps it loose.

"Help me, *please*," she begs. "I think they intend to eat me alive."

“I should think they’re entirely too small for that,” he says, but Jherek lies flat on his stomach, sun-warmed metal beneath him, a chilling breeze rising off the water, and holds out one hand to the girl, helping her scramble up and onto the bridge.

She stands before him, dripping, water pooling around her clunky black boots. Her entire costume is the same unremarkable shade of black, dull and lifeless matte that seems completely indifferent to the noonday brightness of the Museum: a black dress of some drab and unfamiliar fabric down past her knees, ragged black lace draping her wrists, a stiff black frock coat with big black buttons and a stiffer black fraise around her throat. A rather moth-gnawed black tricorne perched crookedly on her head.

“Doesn’t it get awfully tiresome,” he asks her, “always being dressed so somber?”

“It is respectful,” she says, haughty and sharp chin up.

“Respectful of whom?” he asks, still lying on the bridge, but rolled over on his side so that he can see her better.

“Of the Presently and Future *Dead*, you blasphemous dullard.” She makes some odd gesture with her hands.

There is a long tear in one of her black and purple candy-striped stockings and a small bloody place where the mesosaur broke skin, the hint of crimson and spreading stain of darker fabric. Jherek has never before seen anyone *bleed*.

“Do you think,” he asks her, “that if I went wading I might be bitten as well? It looks very interesting, to bleed.”

The girl cocks one black eyebrow and gives him a look that’s one part bewildered exasperation, one part dawning curiosity.

“Does it actually *hurt*?” Jherek Carnelian asks the girl hopefully.

“*Yes*,” she says. “Of *course* it hurts. What are you, some sort of bloody fool?”

“I don’t think so,” he says, “never having actually bled myself.”

“You’re a queer one, right enough,” and she stoops to unlace her wet boots. “The whole lot of you folk are stranger than wormfunk, if you’d have bothered asking me.”

Jherek sits up and watches, alert, as she drains her shoes, chases the tiniest of crustaceans from the left, and hangs them both to dry by black laces; the boots dangle from the bronze rail like twin parasites.

Jherek shrugs, deciding he might be better off if he saves bleeding for another time, better off changing the subject.

“Do you like it?” he asks her, indicating the garden and the Museum’s fossil-crowded walls. “Is it not the most charming gift ever?”

“What is it?” she asks.

“A Palaeozoic Museum, of course,” Jherek answers. “My special gift from sweet Lord Jagged.”

“It’s very bright,” she says uncertainly, shading her eyes and squinting up at the high dome, the white sun blazing in through the glass and metal and twining ivy. “So much light is very disrespectful. I think I will be punished if Anubis or Ligeia find out I’ve been here.”

“Who?”

“My Elders,” she says, still watching the sky. “Master Copticians of Count Perfidy’s Court. I’m only in the second year of my apprenticeship. This sort of thing could keep me out of the Guild altogether.”

“Then why’d you leave the party?” Jherek asks. He has no clear idea what the girl’s talking about, but isn’t interested enough to ask too many questions, wishing she’d be happy to enjoy the muggy antediluvian afternoon, the gentle bleat of the hadrosauri resting in the shade of the fig palms.

“I didn’t *mean* to come in here,” she says, “I was only trying to find the Grand Mortis…”

Jherek yawns, realizes he’s grown quite sleepy in the heat, and the girl stops in mid-sentence.

“You’re very rude,” she says.

“I didn’t mean to be, honestly,” Jherek replies, beginning to wonder what he might say or do that will not somehow offend the girl.

“Well,” she says, sitting down next to him, carefully smoothing her skirt and the long tails of her frock coat. “I expect it’s not your fault. I can’t imagine that you’ve been raised any better. Your folk are all so horribly disrespectful. Absolute heathens, the lot of you.”

“Heathens?” Jherek recognizes the word, but has always thought it some archaic botanical term.

“Yes,” she says, a new note of passion in her voice. “*Heathens*. Why, the very thought of so much sunlight, and then simply *refusing* to die. And what’s worse, coming back if any of you should ever happen to be killed!”

“Heathens, then, are people who don’t die?”

The girl sighs loudly, frightening away the archaeopteryx.

“If you were *not* a heathen, you’d never have asked such a silly and ignorant question. Heathens do not respect the Dead, but revel instead in the transient pleasures of life, disregarding the Holy Rites of Mortification. And along that road lies corporeal dissolution and eternal decay.

“Death is as sacred as Life, which it preserves, which is why we must preserve Death. That is why the words and holy deeds of the Guild Elders, the Copticians and Embalmers, the Tanners and Shroudsmiths, even the lowliest shiners of common bone, must be heeded.”

And she repeats the odd hand motion she made earlier.

“Oh,” Jherek says, resigning himself to the truth, that he must indeed be a heathen, that everyone he loves must also be heathens. “I see. Do you have a name?”

“Sexton,” she says, staring gloomily between her boots as the hadrosauri. “Sexton Dakhmas.”

“And I am Jherek Carnelian, birth son of the Iron Orchid.”

“A heathen name,” Sexton Dakhmas sighs, “Poor lost Jherek. But I shall not blame you.”

“You are kind.”

“I am merciful,” she replies.

“Are you part of My Lady Charlotina’s menagerie, Sexton Dakhmas?” Jherek asks, having decided the girl is not an automaton, not a simple reproduction of a Four Year Empire child.

“My Lord Perfidy’s entire court was stolen from their crypts before I was born, abandoned here.” And she pauses, correcting herself. “No, abandoned *now*, I suppose. Nonetheless, we have struggled bravely to observe the Rites and preserve the sacrosanct remains of our Dead.”

Jherek nods his head, has heard stories of temporal abductions, has heard the Iron Orchid say to Jagged that more than one menagerie has been greatly enriched with beings rescued from time slavers.

Past the hadrosauri and across a small hillock, the snaky teal-and-cream neck of a plesiosaur rises, swan-elegant, from the lagoon. Jherek closes his eyes, content with the moment, the luxury of the Palaeozoic Museum and its treasures, the company of the strange and displaced girl.

“I cannot say that it is unpleasant, though,” she says, whispering almost too quietly for him to hear, Jherek drifting, considering sleep. “The warmth,” she says.

Following Jagged's careful directions, the Iron Orchid comes, ethereal hematite and lady of petals and gold-dust pollen, finally, to the Palaeozoic Museum. She twists one zircon ring to tint her eyes against the sudden bright, then stands a moment at the rail, admiring the craftsmanship, the impeccable balance of restoration and imagination, that would have given away the Museum's authorship, if she'd not known already. After the unrelenting glower of My Lady Charlotina's party ("Twelve-hundred *distinct* shades of grey," Werther de Goethe bragged, betraying his hand in the whole ill-considered affair), after the endless "entertainments," consisting entirely of wearisome demonstrations of embalming and mummification techniques, the fragrant air and vibrance of this garden makes her feel clean again.

"Carnelian?" she calls, not seeing Jherek, but is answered only by the grunts and chirrups of the Museum's exhibits. She suspects, at first, that he is playing a game with her, hide-and-seek or qwerty zotz, but finds him easily enough a moment later, asleep on a little bridge near the entrance. And the darkly-clothed girl child, one of My Lady Charlotina's props, no doubt, snoring softly at his side. The girl's skin, alien to the sun, has turned a bright carnation hue of red.

An improvement, surely, the Iron Orchid thinks, as she lifts Jherek in her gleaming arms. He stirs, a gentle dream noise from his slightly parted lips.

"Loveliest Jherek," she says. She kisses his forehead, walks away from the sleeping, dowdy, sun-burned child of the Four Year Empire. "Even forever will seem too short, with you to spend it with."

Behind her, Jagged's garden, exquisite tapestry of anachronisms, ages stitched together like wounded soldiers, whispers and screams as they leave.

If all time is eternally present,
All time is unredeemable.
T. S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton" (1935 – 1936)

Giants in the Earth

An oddity of the early years of my career, the “tie-in” anthology, playing in other people’s sandboxes. Here, it was Michael Moorcock’s *Dancers At the End of Time*, and this may or may not make sense to you if you’ve not read those books. But I love the way I fit he words together, and this impossible, decadent, distant future which so misunderstands the past (as always we do). So, here’s my tribute to Moorcock, and also to Benjamin Waterhouse Hawkins, and the stillborn Palaeozoic Museum that should, to this day, stand in Central Park. This story takes place before Moorcock’s *An Alien Heat* (1971). Also, never confuse mesosaurs (Mesosauria) and mosasaurs (Squamata).

Zelda Fitzgerald in Ballet Attire

1

In this absence of others
There is not the peace we’re led
To believe in like Sunday school

I cannot hear for the roar This wind
Has me half-deaf Good as that
Or more
Nothing has been restored Things fall apart and That’s the way
They stay
Nothing to be learned except edges slice and
Children take apart because
They can and cry at the mess
They’ve made Oh

Look to Father for the glue (which is Heaven)
To mother for licking wounds (which is this
Brooding shade with crystal wrists) Oh

2

Ugly lines of paper houses
The sky is never dark
And the stars forget themselves
We are pink eyes in cages

3

Our lives are not innocent
Any more than they can be romantic;
The long red century has laid dull stone
Between us and any finer attribute.

We have buried what we might have known of
Such things,
Sown the graves with salt and indifference

That nothing might grow there ever again
Except dim and orphaned memory.

There are words we cannot even write,
Or speak, for the forgetting of their sincerity.

Eggshell and no
Royal restoration.
These fragments shored
For you, and I finally see for you alone.

October 12, 1995 – July 20, 1999

Zelda Fitzgerald in Ballet Attire

I don’t write much poetry. Too many reasons to go into. This one was the first I thought was good enough to show anyone, the first I would allow to be published. Here’s many years I lived and survived, condensed, distilled into a few stanzas.

PART TWO

2000 – 2004

Spindleshanks

(New Orleans, 1956)

The end of July, indolent, dog-day swelter inside the big white house on Prytania Street; Greek Revival columns painted as cool and white as a vanilla ice cream cone, and from the second-floor verandah Reese can see right over the wall into Lafayette Cemetery, if she wants to – Lafayette No 1, and the black iron letters above the black iron gate to remind anyone who forgets. She doesn't dislike the house, not the way that she began to dislike her apartment in Boston before she finally left, but it's much too big, even with Emma, and so far she hasn't even bothered to take the sheets off most of the furniture downstairs. This one bedroom almost more than they need, anyway, her typewriter and the electric fan from Woolworth's on the table by the wide French doors to the verandah, so she can sit there all day, sip her gin and tonic and stare out at the whitewashed brick walls and the crypts whenever the words aren't coming.

And these days the words are hardly ever coming, hardly ever there when she goes looking for them, and her editor wanted the novel finished two months ago. Running from that woman and her shiny black patent pumps, her fashionable hats, as surely as she ran from Boston, the people there she was tired of listening to, and so Reese Callicott leased this big white house for the summer and didn't tell anyone where she was going or why. Still, she might have looked for a house in Vermont or Connecticut, instead, if she'd stopped to take the heat seriously, but the whole summer paid for in advance, all the way through September, and there's no turning back now. Nothing now but cracked ice and Gilbey's and her view of the cemetery; her mornings and afternoons sitting at the typewriter and the mocking blank white paper, sweat and the candy smell of magnolias all day long, then jasmine at night.

Emma's noisy little parties at night, too, all night sometimes, the motley handful of people she drags in like lost puppies and scatters throughout the big house on Prytania Street; this man a philosophy or religion student at Tulane and that woman a poet from somewhere lamentable in Mississippi, that fellow a friend of a friend of Faulkner or Capote. Their accents and pretenses and the last of them hanging around

until almost dawn unless Reese finds the energy to run them off sooner. But energy is in shorter supply than the words these days, and mostly she just leaves them alone, lets them play their jazz and Fats Domino records too loud and have the run of the place because it makes Emma happy. No point in denying that she feels guilty for dragging poor Emma all the way to New Orleans, making her suffer the heat and mosquitoes because Chapter Eight of *The Ecstatic River* might as well be a cinder-block wall.

Reese lights a cigarette and blows the smoke towards the verandah, towards the cemetery, and a hot breeze catches it and quickly drags her smoke ghost to pieces.

“There’s a party in the Quarter tonight,” Emma says. She’s lying on the bed, four o’clock Friday afternoon and she’s still wearing her butteryellow house coat, lying in bed with one of her odd books and a glass of bourbon and lemonade.

“Isn’t there always a party in the Quarter?” Reese asks, and now she’s watching two old women in the cemetery, one with a bouquet of white flowers. She thinks they’re chrysanthemums, but the women are too far away for her to be sure.

“Well, yes. Of course. But this one’s going to be something different. I think a real voodoo woman will be there.” A pause and she adds, “You should come.”

“You know I have too much work.”

Reese doesn’t have to turn around in her chair to know the pout on Emma’s face, the familiar, exaggerated disappointment, and she suspects that it doesn’t actually matter to Emma whether or not she comes to the party. But this ritual is something that has to be observed, the way old women have to bring flowers to the graves of relatives who died a hundred years ago, the way she has to spend her days staring at blank pages.

“It might help – with your writing, I mean – if you got out once in a while. Really, sometimes I think you’ve forgotten how to talk to people.”

“I talk to people, Emma. I talked to that Mr. …” and she has to stop, searching for his name, and there it is, “That Mr. Leonard, just the other night. You know, the fat one with the antique shop.”

“He’s almost *sixty* years old,” Emma says. Reese takes another drag off her cigarette, exhales, and “Well, it’s not like you want me out looking for a husband,” she replies.

“Have it your way,” Emma says, the way she always says, *Have it your way*, and she goes back to her book, and Reese goes back to staring at the obstinate typewriter and watching the dutiful old women on the other side of the high cemetery wall.

Reese awakens from a nightmare a couple of hours before dawn, awake and sweating and breathless, chilled by a breeze through the open verandah doors. Emma’s fast asleep beside her, lying naked on top of the sheets, though Reese didn’t hear her come in. If she cried out or made any other noises in her sleep, at least it doesn’t seem to have disturbed Emma. Reese stares at the verandah a moment, the night beyond, and then she sits up, both feet on the floor, and she reaches for the lamp cord. But that might wake Emma, and it *was* only a nightmare after all, a bad dream, and in a minute or two it will all seem at least as absurd as her last novel.

Instead she lights a cigarette and sits smoking in the dark, listening to the restless sounds the big house makes when everyone is still and quiet and it’s left to its own devices, its random creaks and thumps, solitary house thoughts and memories filtered through plaster and lathe and burnished oak. The mumbling house and the exotic, piping song of a night bird somewhere outside, mundane birdsong made exotic because she hasn’t spent her whole life hearing it, some bird that doesn’t fly as far north as Boston. Reese listens to the bird and the settling house, and to Emma’s soft snores, while she smokes the cigarette almost down to the filter, and then she gets up, walks across the wide room to the verandah doors, only meaning to close them. Only meaning to shut out a little of the night, and then maybe she can get back to sleep.

But she pauses halfway, distracted by the book on Emma’s nightstand, a very old book, by the look of it, something else borrowed from one or another of her Royal Street acquaintances, no doubt. More bayou superstition, Negro tales of voodoo and swamp magic, zombies and grave-robbing, the bogeyman passed off as folklore, and Reese squints to read the cover, fine leather worn by ages of fingers and the title stamped in flaking crimson – *Cultes des Goules* by François Honore-Balfour, Comte d’Erlette. The whole volume in French, and the few grim illustrations do nothing for Reese’s nerves, so she sets it back down on the table, making a mental note to ask Emma what she sees in such morbid things, and, by the way, why hasn’t she ever mentioned that she can read French?

The verandah doors half shut, and Reese pauses, looks out at the little city of the dead across the street, the marble and cement roofs dull white by the light of the setting half moon, and a small shred of the dream comes back to her then. Emma, the day they met, a snowy December afternoon in Harvard Square, Reese walking fast past the Old Burying Ground and First Church, waiting in the cold for her train, and Emma standing off in the distance. Dark silhouette against the drifts and the white flakes swirling around her, and Reese tries to think what could possibly have been so frightening about any of that. Some minute detail already fading when she opened her eyes, something about the sound of the wind in the trees, maybe, or a line of footprints in the snow between her and Emma. Reese Callicott stares at Lafayette for a few more minutes, and then she closes the verandah doors, locks them, and goes back to bed.

"Oh, that's horrible," Emma says and frowns as she pours a shot of whiskey into her glass of lemonade. "Jesus Christ, I can't believe they found her right down there on the sidewalk, and we slept straight through the whole thing."

"Well, there might not have been that much noise," Carlton says helpfully and sips at his own drink, bourbon on the rocks, and he takes off his hat and sets it on the imported wicker table in the center of the verandah. Carlton, the only person in New Orleans that Reese would think to call her friend, dapper, middle-aged man with a greying mustache and his Big Easy accent. Someone that she met at a writer's conference in Providence years ago, before Harper finally bought *The Light Beyond Center* and her short stories started selling to *The New Yorker* and *The Atlantic*. Carlton the reason she's spending the summer in exile in the house on Prytania Street, because it belongs to a painter friend of his who's away in Spain or Portugal or some place like that.

"They say her throat, her larynx, was torn out," he says. "So she might not have made much of a racket at all."

Reese sets her own drink down on the white verandah rail in front of her, nothing much left of it but melting ice and faintly gin-flavored water, but she didn't bring the bottle of Gilbey's out with her, and the morning heat's made her too lazy to go back inside and fix another. She stares down at the wet spot at the corner of Prytania and Sixth Street, the wet pavement very near the cemetery wall drying quickly in the scalding ten o'clock sun.

“Still,” Emma says, “I think we would have heard *something*, don’t you Reese?”

“Emmie, I think you sleep like the dead,” Reese says, the grisly pun unintended, but now it’s out, and no one’s seemed to notice, anyway.

“Well, the *Picayune*’s claiming it was a rabid mongrel stray – ” Emma begins, but then Carlton clears his throat, interrupting her.

“I have a good friend on the force,” he says. “He doesn’t think it was an animal at all. He thinks it’s more likely someone was trying to make it *look* like the killer was an animal.”

“Who was she?” Reese asks, and now there are two young boys, nine or ten years old, standing near the cemetery wall, pointing at the wet spot and whispering excitedly to one another.

“A colored woman. Mrs. Duquette’s new cook,” Carlton says. “I don’t remember her name offhand. Does it matter?”

The two boys have stooped down to get a better look, maybe hoping for a splotch of blood that the police missed when they hosed off the sidewalk a few hours earlier.

“What was she doing out at that hour, anyway?” Emma asks, then finishes stirring her drink with an index finger and tests it with the tip of her tongue.

Carlton sighs and leans back in his wicker chair. “No one seems to know precisely.”

“Well, I think I’ve had about enough of this gruesome business for one day,” Reese says. “Just look at those boys down there,” and she stands up and shouts at them, Hey, you boys, get away from there this very minute, and they stand up and stare at her like she’s a crazy woman.

“I said get *away* from there. Go home!”

“They’re only *boys*, Reese,” Carlton says, and just then one of them flips Reese his middle finger, and they both laugh before squatting back down on the sidewalk to resume their examination of the murder scene.

“They’re horrid little *monsters*,” Reese says, and she sits slowly back down again.

“They’re *all* monsters, dear,” Emma says and smiles and reaches across the table to massage the place between Reese’s shoulder blades that’s always knotted, always tense.

Carlton rubs at his mustache. “I assume all is *not* well with the book,” he says, and Reese scowls, still staring down at the two boys on the

sidewalk.

"You know better than to ask a question like that."

"Yes, well, dear, I had hoped the change of climate would be good for you."

"I don't think this climate is good for anything but heat rash and mildew," Reese grumbles and swirls the ice in her glass. "I need another drink. And then I need to get back to work."

"Maybe you're trying *too* hard," Carlton says and stops fumbling with his mustache. "Maybe you need to get away from this house for just a little while."

"That's what I keep telling her," Emma says. "But you know she won't listen to anyone."

The pout's in her voice again and it's more than Reese can take, those horrible boys and the murder, Carlton's good intentions, and now Emma's pout. She gets up and leaves them, goes inside, trading the bright sunshine for the gentler bedroom shadows, and leaves her lover and her friend alone on the verandah.

Saturday and Emma's usual sort of ragtag entourage, but tonight she's spending most of her time with a dark-skinned woman named Danielle Thibodaux, someone she met the night before at the party on Esplanade, the party with the fabled voodoo priestess. Reese is getting quietly, sullenly drunk in one corner of the immense dining room, the dining room instead of the bedroom because Emma insisted.

"It's such a shame we're letting this place go to waste," she said. Reese was in the middle of a paragraph and didn't have time to argue. Not worth losing her train of thought over, and so here they all are, smoking and drinking around the long mahogany table, candlelight twinkling like starfire in the crystal chandelier, and Reese alone in a Chippendale in the corner. As apart from the others as she can get without offending Emma, and she's pretending that she isn't jealous of the dark-skinned woman with the faint Jamaican accent.

There's a ouija board in the center of the table, empty and unopened wine bottles, brandy and bourbon, Waterford crystal and sterling-silver candlesticks, and the cheap, dime store ouija board there in the middle of it all. One of the entourage brought it along, because he heard there was a ghost in the big white house on Prytania Street, a girl who hung herself

from the top of the stairs when she got the news her young fiancé had died at Appomattox, or some other such worn-out Civil War tragedy, and for an hour they've been drinking and trying to summon the ghost of the suicide or anyone else who might have nothing better to do in the afterlife than talk to a bunch of drunks.

"I'm bored," Emma says finally, and she pushes the ouija board away, sends the tin planchette skittering towards a bottle of pear brandy. "No one wants to talk to us." The petulance in her voice does nothing at all to improve Reese's mood, and she thinks about taking her gin and going upstairs.

Then someone brings up the murdered woman, not even dead a whole day yet and here's some asshole who wants to try and drag her sprit back to earth. Reese rolls her eyes, thinking that even the typewriter would be less torture than these inane, morbid parlor games, and then she notices the uneasy look on the dark woman's face. The woman whispers something to Emma, just a whisper but intimate enough that it draws a fresh pang of jealousy from Reese. Emma looks at the woman, a long moment of silence exchanged between them, and then Emma laughs and shakes her head, as if perhaps the woman's just made the most ridiculous sort of suggestion imaginable.

"I hear it was a wild dog," someone at the table says.

"There's always a lot of rabies this time a year," someone else says. Emma leans forward, eyes narrowed and a look of drunken confidence on her face, her I-know-something-*you*-don't smirk, and they all listen as she tells them about Carlton's policeman friend and what he said that morning about the murdered woman's throat being cut, about her larynx being severed so she couldn't scream for help. That the cops are looking for a killer who wants everyone to *think* it was only an animal.

"Then let's ask her," the man who brought the ouija board says to Emma, and the blonde woman sitting next to him sniggers, an ugly, shameless sort of a laugh that makes Reese think of the two boys outside the walls of Lafayette, searching the sidewalk for traces of the dead woman's blood. There's another disapproving glance from Danielle Thibodaux, then, but Emma only shrugs and reaches for the discarded planchette.

"Hell, why not," she says, her words beginning to slur together just a little. "Maybe *she's* still lurking about," but the dark-skinned woman pushes

her chair away from the table, gets up, and stands a few feet behind Emma, watches nervously as seven or eight of the entourage place their fingers on the edges of the planchette.

"We need to talk to the woman who was murdered outside the cemetery this morning," Emma says, affecting a low, spooky whisper, phony creepshow awe, and fixing her eyes at the center of the planchette. "Mrs. Duplett's dead cook," Emma whispers, and someone corrects her. "No, honey. It's *Duquette*. Mrs. Duquette,." Several people laugh.

"Yeah, right. Mrs. Duquette."

"Jesus," Reese whispers. The dark-skinned woman stares across the room at her, her brown eyes that seem to say, *Can't you see things are bad enough already?* The woman frowns, and Reese sighs and pours herself another drink.

"We want to talk to Mrs. Duquette's murdered cook," Emma says again. "Are you there?"

A sudden titter of feigned surprise or fright when the tin planchette finally begins to move, haltingly at first, then circling the wooden board aimlessly for a moment before it swings suddenly to no and is still again.

"Then who *are* we talking to?" Emma says impatiently, and the planchette starts to move again. It wanders the board for a moment, and members of the entourage begin to call out letters as the heart-shaped thing drifts from character to character.

"S…P…I…N," and then the dark-skinned woman takes a step forward and rests her almond hands on Emma's shoulders. Reese thinks that the woman actually looks scared now and sits up straight in her chair so that she has a better view of the board.

"D…L," someone says.

"Stop this now, Emma," the dark woman demands. She *sounds* afraid, and maybe there's a hint of anger, too, but Emma only shakes her head and doesn't take her eyes off the restless planchette.

"It's okay, Danielle. We're just having a little fun, that's all."

"F…no, *E*…" and now someone whispers the word, "Spindle, it said its name is Spindle," but the planchette is still moving, and "*Please,*" the dark woman says to Emma.

"S…H," and now the woman has taken her hands off Emma's shoulder, has stepped back into the shadows at the edge of the candlelight

again. Emma calls out the letters with the others, voices joined in drunken expectation, and Reese has to restrain an urge to join them herself.

"A…N…K…S," and then the planchette is still, and everyone's looking at Emma like she knows what they should do next. "Spindleshanks," she says. Reese catches the breathless hitch in her voice, as if she's been running or has climbed the stairs too quickly. Fat beads of sweat stand out on her forehead and glimmer in the flickering orange-white glow of the candles.

"Spindleshanks," Emma says again, and then, "Oh, come now. That's *not* your name," she whispers.

"Ask it something else," one of the women says eagerly. "Ask Spindleshanks something else, Emmie," but Emma shakes her head, frowns and takes her hands from the planchette, breaking the mystic circle of fingers pressed against the tin. When the others follow suit, she pushes the ouija board away from her again.

"I'm tired of this shit," she says. Reese can tell that this time the petulance is there to hide something else, something she isn't used to hearing in Emma's voice. "Somebody turn on the lights."

Reese stands up and presses the switch on the dining room wall next to a gaudy, gold-framed reproduction of John Singer Sargent's *The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit* – the pale, secretive faces of five girls and the solid darkness framed between two urns – and in the flood of electric light, the first thing that Reese notices is that the almond-skinned woman has gone, that she no longer stands there behind Emma's chair. She doesn't see the second thing until one of the women cries out and points frantically at the wall above the window, the white plaster above the drapes. Emma sees it, too, but neither of them says a word; both sit still and silent for a minute, two minutes, while the tall letters written in blood above the brocade valance begin to dry and turn from crimson to a dingy reddish brown.

When everyone has left, and Emma has taken a couple of sleeping pills and gone upstairs, Reese sits at one end of the table and stares at the writing on the dining room wall. SPINDLESHANKS in sloppy letters that began to drip and run before they began to dry. She sips at her gin and wonders if they were already there before the reckless séance even started. Wonders, too, if Danielle Thibodaux has some hand in this, playing a clever, nasty trick on Emma's urbane boozers, if maybe they offended her or someone

else at the Friday night party, and this was their comeuppance, tit for tat, and next time perhaps they'll stick to their own gaudy thrills and leave the natives alone.

The writing is at least twelve feet off the floor, and Reese can't imagine how the woman might have pulled it off, unless perhaps Emma was in on the prank as well. Maybe some collusion between the two of them to keep people talking about Emma Goldfarb's parties long after the lease is up and they've gone back to Boston. "Remember the night Emma called up Spindleshanks?" they'll say, or "Remember that dreadful stuff on the dining room wall? It *was* blood, wasn't it?" And yes, Reese thinks, it's a sensible explanation for Emma's insistence that they use the downstairs for the party that night, and that there be no light burning but the candles.

It almost makes Reese smile, the thought that Emma might be half so resourceful, and then she wonders how they're ever going to get the wall clean again. She's seen a ladder in the gardener's shed behind the house and Carlton will probably know someone who'll take care of it, paint over the mess if it can't be washed away.

In the morning, Emma will most likely admit her part in the ghostly deceit, and then she'll lie in bed laughing at her gullible friends. She'll probably even laugh at Reese. "I got you, too, didn't I?" she'll smirk. "Oh no, don't you try to lie to *me*, Miss Callicott. *I* saw the look on your face." In a minute more, Reese blows out the candles, turns off the lights, and follows Emma upstairs to bed.

A few hours later, almost a quarter of four by the black hands of the alarm clock ticking loud on her bedside table, and Reese awakens from the nightmare of Harvard Square again. The snow storm become a blizzard, and this time she didn't even make it past the church, no farther than the little graveyard huddled in the lee of the steeple, and the storm was like icicle daggers. She walked against the wind and kept her eyes directly in front of her, because there was something on the other side of the wrought-iron fence, something past the sharp pickets that wanted her to turn and see it. Something that mumbled. The sound of its feet in the snow was so soft, like footsteps in powdered sugar.

And then Reese was awake and sweating, shivering because the verandah doors were standing open again. The heat and humidity so bad at night, worse at night than in the day, she suspects, and they can't get to

sleep without the cranky electric fan and the doors left standing open. But now even this stingy breeze is making her shiver, and she gets up, moving cat-slow and cat-silent so she doesn't wake Emma, and walks across the room to close the doors and switch off the fan.

She's reaching for the brass door handles when Emma stirs behind her, her voice groggy from the Valium and alcohol, groggy and confused. "Reese? Is something wrong?" she asks. "Has something happened?"

"No, dear," Reese answers her. "I had a bad dream, that's all. Go back to sleep," and she's already pulling the tall French doors shut when something down on the sidewalk catches her attention. Some quick movement there in the darkness gathered beneath the ancient magnolias and oaks along Sixth Street; hardly any moon for shadows tonight, but what shadows there are enough to cast a deeper gloom below those shaggy boughs. Reese stands very still and keeps her eyes on the street, waiting, though she couldn't say for what.

Emma shifts in bed, and the mattress creaks, and then there's only the noise from the old fan and Reese's heart, the night birds that she doesn't know the names for calling to one another from the trees. Reese squints into the blacker shades of night along the leafy edge of Sixth, directly across from the place where the police found the body of the murdered cook, searching for any hint of the movement she might or might not have seen only a moment before. But there's only the faint moonlight winking dull off the chrome fender of someone's Chrysler, the whole thing nothing more than a trick of her sleep-clouded eyes, the lingering nightmare. Reese closes the verandah doors and goes back to bed and Emma.

Spindleshanks

This started as an entirely different story, and then went somewhere I never guessed it would. Which happens a lot. Happened then; happens now. Here, I'm trying to learn to whisper. Sometimes, I have wanted to be Tennessee Williams so badly it's shown.

The Road of Pins

1.

May

Without a doubt, Perrault's paintings are some of the most hideous things that Alex has ever seen, and if her head didn't hurt so much, if it hadn't been hurting all day long, she might have kept her opinions to herself, might have made it all the way through the evening without pissing Margot off again. The first Thursday of the month so another opening night at Artifice, another long evening of forced smiles for the aesthete zombies, the shaking of hands and digging about for dusty scraps of congeniality, when all she wants is to be home soaking in a hot, soapy bath or lying facedown on the cool hardwood floor of their bedroom while Margot massages her neck. Maybe something quiet playing on the stereo, something soothing, and the volume so low there's almost no sound at all, Nina Simone or Billie Holiday, and then her headache would slowly begin to pull its steelburr fingers out of the soft places behind her eyes, and she could breathe again.

"You shouldn't have even come tonight," Margot whispers, sips cheap white wine from a plastic cup and stares glumly at the floor. "If you were going to be like this, I wish you'd gone home, instead."

"You and me both, baby," and Alex frowns and looks past her lover at the smartly dressed crowd milling about the little gallery like a wary flock of pigeons.

"So why don't you leave? I can get a taxi home, or Paul will be happy to give me a ride," and now Alex thinks that Margot's starting to sound even more impatient with her than usual, probably afraid that someone might have overheard the things she said about the paintings.

"I'm here now," Alex says. "I suppose I might as well stick it out." She rubs roughly at the aching space between her eyebrows, squints across the room at the high white walls decorated with Perrault's canvases, the track lights to fix each murky scene in its own warm incandescent pool.

"Then will you please try to stop sulking. Talk to someone. I have to get back to work."

Alex shrugs noncommittally, and Margot turns and walks away, threading herself effortlessly into the murmuring crowd. Almost at once, a man in a banana-yellow turtleneck sweater and tight black jeans stops her, and he points at one of the paintings. Margot nods her head and smiles for him, already wearing her pleasant face again, annoyance tucked safe behind the mask. The man smiles back at her and nods his head, too.

Five minutes later, and Alex has made her way across the gallery, another cup of the dry, slightly bitter Chardonnay in her hand, her fourth in half an hour, but it hasn't helped her head at all, and she wishes she had a gin and tonic, instead. She's been eavesdropping, listening in on an elderly German couple even though she doesn't speak a word of German. The man and woman are standing close together before one of the larger paintings; the same sooty blur of oils as all the rest, at least a thousand shades of grey, faint rumors of green and alabaster, and a single crimson smudge floating near the center. The small printed card on the wall beside the canvas reads *Fecunda ratis*, no date, no price, and Alex wonders if the old man and woman understand Latin any better than she understands German.

The man takes a sudden, deep breath then, hitching breath almost like the space between sobs, and holds one hand out, as if he intends to touch the canvas, to press his thick fingertips to the whirling chaos of charcoal brush strokes. But the woman stops him, her nervous hand at his elbow, hushed words passed between them, and in a moment they've wandered away, and Alex is left standing alone in front of the painting.

She takes a swallow of wine, grimacing at the taste, and tries to concentrate on the painting, tries to *see* whatever all the others seem to see; the red smudge for a still point, nexus or fulcrum, and she thinks maybe it's supposed to be a cap or a hat, crimson wool cap stuck on the head of the nude girl down on her hands and knees, head bowed so that her face is hidden, only a wild snarl of hair and the cruel, incongruent red cap. There are dark, hulking forms surrounding the girl, and at first glance Alex thought they were only stones, some crude, megalithic ring, standing stones, but now she sees that they're meant to be beasts of some sort. Great, shaggy things squatting on their haunches, watching the girl, protective or imprisoning captors, and perhaps this is the final, lingering moment before the kill.

"Amazing, isn't it," and Alex hadn't realized that the girl was standing there beside her until she spoke. Pretty black girl with four silver rings in

each earlobe. She has blue eyes.

"No, actually," Alex says. "I think it's horrible," never mind what Margot would *want* her to say; her head hurts too much to lie, and she doesn't like the way the painting is making her feel. Her stomach is sour from the migraine and the bitter Chardonnay.

"Yes, it is, isn't it," the black girl says, undaunted, then she leans closer to the canvas. "We saw this one in San Francisco last year. Sometimes I dream about it. I've written two poems about this piece."

"No kidding," Alex replies, not trying very hard to hide her sarcasm. She scans the room, but there's no sign of Margot anywhere. She catches a glimpse of the artist, though – tall, scarecrow-thin and rumpled man in a shiny black suit that looks too big for him. He's talking with the German couple. Or he's only listening to them talk to him, or pretending to, standing with his long arms crossed and no particular expression on his sallow face. Then the crowd shifts, and she can't see him anymore.

"You're Alex Marlowe, aren't you? Margot's girlfriend," the black girl asks.

"Yeah," Alex says. "That's me." And the girl smiles and laughs a musical, calculated sort of a laugh.

"I liked your novel a lot," she says. "Aren't you ever going to write another one?"

"Well, my agent doesn't think so," and maybe the girl can see how much Alex would rather talk about almost anything else in the world, and she laughs again.

"I'm Jude Sinclair. I'm writing a review of the show for *Artforum*. You don't care very much for Perrault's work, I take it."

"I'm pretty sure I'm not supposed to have opinions about painting, Jude. That's strictly Margot's department – "

"But you *don't* like it, do you?" Jude says, pressing the point, her voice lower now, and there's something almost conspiratorial in the tone. A wry edge to her smile, and she glances back at *Fecunda ratis*.

"No," Alex says. "I'm sorry. I don't."

"I'm not sure I did either, not at first. But he gets in your head. The first time I saw a Perrault I thought it was contrived, too self-consciously retro. I thought, this guy wants to be Edvard Munch and Van Gogh and Albert Pinkham Ryder all rolled into one. I thought he was way too hung up on Romanticism."

“So are those things supposed to be bears?” Alex asks, pointing at one of the looming objects that isn’t a megalith.

Jude Sinclair shakes her head. “No,” she says. “They’re wolves.”

“Well, they don’t look like wolves to me,” and then Jude takes her hand and leads Alex to the next painting, this one barely half the size of the last. A sky the sickly color of sage and olives, ocher and cheese draped above a withered landscape, a few stunted trees in the foreground and their bare and crooked branches claw vainly at an irrevocable Heaven. Between their trunks the figure of a woman is visible in the middle distance, lean and twisted as the blighted limbs of the trees, and she’s looking apprehensively over her shoulder at something the artist has only hinted at, shadows of shadows crouched menacingly at the lower edges of the canvas. The card on the wall next to the painting is blank except for a date – 1893. Jude points out a yellowed strip of paper pasted an inch or so above the woman’s head, narrow strip not much larger than a fortune-cookie prognostication.

“Read it,” she says. Alex has to bend close because the words are very small and she isn’t wearing her glasses.

“No. Read it out loud.”

Alex sighs, quickly growing very tired of this. “A woman in a field,” she reads. “Something grabbed her.” Then she reads it over again to herself, just in case she missed the sense of it the first time. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“It’s from a book by a man named Charles Hoy Fort. Have you ever heard of him?”

“No,” Alex says, “I haven’t.” She looks back down at the woman standing in the wide, barren field beyond the trees, and the longer she stares the more frightened the woman seems to be. Not merely apprehensive, no, genuinely terrified. She would run, Alex thinks, she would run away as fast as she could, but she’s too afraid to even move. Too afraid of whatever she sees waiting there in the shadows beneath the trees, and the painter has trapped her in this moment forever.

“I hadn’t either, before Perrault. There are passages from Fort in most of these paintings. Sometimes they’re hard to find.”

Alex takes a step back from the wall, her mouth gone dry as dust and wishing she had more of the wine, wishing she had a cigarette, wondering if Judith Sinclair smokes.

“His genius – Perrault’s, I mean – lies in what he *suggests*,” the black girl says, and her blue eyes sparkle like gems. “What he doesn’t have to *show* us. He understands that our worst fears come from the pictures that we make in our heads, not from anything he could ever paint.”

“I’m sorry,” Alex says, not exactly sure what she’s apologizing for this time, but it’s the only thing she can think to say, her head suddenly too full of the frightened woman and the writhing, threatful trees, the pain behind her eyes swelling. She only knows for certain that she doesn’t want to look at any more of these ridiculous paintings. That they make her feel unclean, almost as if by simply seeing them she’s played some unwitting part in their creation.

“There’s nothing to be sorry for,” Jude says. “It’s pretty heady stuff. My boyfriend can’t stand Perrault, won’t even let me *talk* about him.”

Alex says something polite then, nice to meet you, good luck with the review, see you around, something she doesn’t mean and won’t remember later. She leaves the girl still gazing at the painting labeled *1893*. On the far side of the gallery, Margot is busy smiling for the scarecrow in his baggy black suit, and Alex slips unnoticed through the crowd, past another dozen of Albert Perrault’s carefully hung grotesques, the ones she hasn’t examined and doesn’t ever want to. She keeps her eyes straight ahead until she’s made it through the front door and is finally standing alone on the sidewalk outside Artifice, breathing in the safe and stagnant city smells of the warm Atlanta night.

2.

June

The stuffy little screening room on Peachtree Street reeks of ancient cigarette smoke and the sticky, fermenting ghosts of candy and spilled sodas, stale popcorn and the fainter, musky scent of human sweat. Probably worse things, too, this place a porn theater for more than a decade before new management and the unprofitable transition from skin flicks to art-house cinema. Alex sits alone in the back row, and there are only eleven or twelve other people in the theater, pitiful Saturday night turnout for a Bergman double-feature. She’s stopped wondering if Margot’s ever going to show, stopped wondering that halfway through the third reel of *Wild Strawberries*, and she knows that if she goes to the pay phone outside the

lobby, if she stands in the rain and calls their apartment, she'll only get the answering machine.

Later, of course, Margot will apologize for standing her up, will explain how she couldn't get away from the gallery because the carpenters tore out a wall when they were only supposed to mark studs, or the security system is on the fritz again and she had to wait two hours for a service tech to show. Nothing that could possibly be helped, but she's sorry anyway. These things wouldn't happen, she'll say, if Alex would carry a cell phone, or a least a pager.

Wild Strawberries has ended, and after a ten- or fifteen-minute intermission, the house lights have gone down again, a long moment of darkness marred only by the bottle-green glow of an exit sign before the screen is washed in a flood of light so brilliant that it hurts Alex's eyes. She blinks at the countdown leader, five, four, three, the staccato beep at two, one, and then the grainy black-and-white picture. No front titles – a man carrying a wooden staff walks slowly across a scrubby, rock-strewn pasture, and a dog trails close behind him. The man is dressed in peasant clothes, at least the way that European peasants dress in old Hollywood movies, and when he reaches the crest of a hill, he stops and looks down at something out of frame, something hidden from the audience. His lips part, and his eyes grow wide, an expression that is anger and surprise, disgust and horror all at the same time. There's no sound but his dog barking and the wind.

"Hey, what is *this* shit?" someone shouts near the front of the theater, a fat man, and he stands and glares up at the projection booth. Some of the others have started mumbling, confused or annoyed whispers, and Alex has no idea what the film is, only that it isn't *The Seventh Seal*. Onscreen, the camera cuts away from the peasant, and now there's a close-up of a dead animal, instead, a ragged, woolly mass streaked with gore the color of molasses. It takes her a second or two to realize that it's a sheep. Its throat has been ripped out, and its tongue lolls from its mouth. The camera pulls back as the man kneels beside the dead animal, then cuts to a close-up of the dog. It's stopped barking and licks at its lips.

"Jesus fucking *Christ*," the fat man growls, and then he storms up the aisle, past Alex and out the swinging doors to the lobby. No one else leaves their seat, though a few heads have turned to watch the fat man's exit. Someone laughs nervously, and onscreen the peasant man has lifted the dead sheep in his arms, is walking quickly away from the camera, and his

dog follows close behind. The camera lingers as the man grows smaller and smaller in the distance. The ground where the sheep lay glistens wetly.

A woman sitting a couple of seats in front of Alex turns around. “Do *you* have any idea at all what this is?” she asks.

“No,” Alex replies. “No, I don’t.”

The woman frowns and sighs loudly. “The projectionist must have made a mistake,” she says and turns back towards the screen before Alex can say anything else.

When the man and the dog have shrunk to bobbing specks, the camera finally cuts away, trades the stony pasture, the blood-soaked patch of grass, for a close-up of a church steeple and the cacophony of tolling bells spills out through tinny stereo speakers and fills the theater.

“Well, this isn’t what I paid six dollars to see,” the woman two seats in front of Alex grumbles.

The fat man doesn’t come back, and if the projectionist *has* made a mistake, no one seems to be in much of a hurry to correct it. The audience has grown quiet again, apparently more curious than perturbed, and the film moves from scene to scene, a flickering progression of images and story, dialogue pared to little more than whispers and occasional, furtive glances between the actors. A mountain village and a wolf killing sheep somewhere that might be France or Italy, but it’s impossible to tell because everyone speaks with British accents. The peasant man from the opening scene (if that truly *was* the opening scene) has a blind daughter who spends her days inside their little house gazing out a window, as though she could see the mountains in the distance.

“Ingmar Bergman didn’t make this film,” the woman sitting in front of Alex says conclusively. “I don’t know who made this film,” and then someone turns and asks the woman to stop talking, please.

Finally, a young boy is found dead and a frantic hunt for the wolf ensues, night and wrathful villagers with torches, hounds and antique rifles wandering through a mist-shrouded forest. It’s obvious that this scene was shot on a soundstage, the contorted nightmare trees too bizarre to possibly be real, nothing but plywood and chicken wire and papier-mâché. Some of the trunks, the tortuous limbs, are undoubtedly meant to suggest random scraps of human anatomy – the arch of a spine, a pair of arms ending in gnarled roots, a female torso sprouting half-formed from the bole of an oak.

Alex thinks that maybe there's something big skulking along through the gloom just beyond the wavering light of the torches, insinuation of spider-long legs, and sometimes it seems to move a little ahead of the hunters; other times it trails behind.

The woman seated two rows in front of Alex makes a disgusted, exasperated sound and stands up, her silhouette momentarily eclipsing the screen. "This is absurd," she says. "I'm asking for my money back right now," speaking to no one or to everyone who might be listening. She leaves the theater, and someone down front laughs. "Good fucking riddance," a husky male voice whispers.

Onscreen, a shout, the bonewet snap of living wood, and one of the villagers raises his gun, extreme close-up of his finger around the trigger before the boom and flash of gunpowder. The tinny speakers blare rifle fire and the furious barking of dogs, so loud that Alex puts her hands over her ears. A man screams and the scene dissolves, then, fades away to daylight and a high-angle view of a dirt road winding across the fields towards the village. The camera zooms slowly in on a small gathering of peasant women waiting at the end of the road; silent despair in their weathered faces, loss, resignation, fear, and one by one they turn and walk back towards their homes.

Alex squints down at her watch, leans forward in her seat, and angles her wrist towards the screen, the grey-silver light off the scratched crystal so she can read the black hour and minute hands. Only half an hour since the film began, though it seems like it's been much longer, and she wonders if Margot is home yet. She thinks again about the pay phone outside the theater, about the gallery and the answering machine.

She glances back at the screen, and now there's a close-up of a skull, a sheep's, perhaps, but Alex isn't sure; bone bleached dry and stark as chalk, a leathery patch of hide still clinging to its muzzle, the empty sockets for eyes that have rotted away or been eaten by insects and crows. The lonely sound of the wind, and the film cuts to the peasant's blind daughter, a music box playing the theme from *Swan Lake* softly in the background, and she stares out the window of her dead father's house. She's neither smiling nor does she look unhappy, her hands folded neatly in her lap. Then a man is speaking from somewhere behind her. The cold, guttural voice is so entirely unexpected that Alex jumps, startled, and she misses the first part of it, whatever was said before the girl turns her head towards the unseen

speaker, raises a hand and places one index finger to the center of her forehead.

"I saw the light again last night," she says, the milky, colorless cataracts to prove that she's a liar or insane, and then the girl's hand returns to her lap. "Floating across the meadow," she adds.

The music box stops abruptly, and now there's the small, hard sound of a dog barking far, far away.

"Who are you? Your hand is cold – "

"Which road will you take?" the guttural voice asks, interrupting her. "That of the needles or that of the pins?"

She turns to the window again, imperfect, transparent mirror for her plain face. For an instant there seems to be another reflection there, a lean and hungry shadow crouched close behind the blind girl's chair. And then there's a popping, fluttering racket from the projection booth as the world is swallowed in pure white light, and Alex knows that the film hasn't ended, it's merely *stopped* as inexplicably as it began.

The house lights come up, but she keeps her seat, sits waiting for her eyes to adjust as the handful of people remaining in the theater stands and begins to drift towards the lobby doors, confused and thoughtful faces, overheard bits of conjecture and undisguised bewilderment.

"It could've been Robert Florey," a man who looks like a college professor says to a blonde girl in a KMFDM T-shirt, slender girl young enough to be his daughter. "Do you know, Florey, dear?" he asks. "I've always heard there was a lost Florey out there somewhere."

"Well, they might have told us they didn't have *The Seventh Seal*," another man complains. "They could have said *something*."

And when they've all gone, and Alex is alone with the matte-black walls and the sugar-and-vinegar theater smells, she sits and stares at the blank screen for another minute, trying to be certain what she saw, or didn't see, at the end.

3.

July

Margot away for the entire week, a lecture series in Montreal – "Formalism, Expressionism, and the Post-Modernist Denial," according to the flier stuck to the refrigerator with a magnet shaped like an apple core – and Alex left alone in the Midtown condo paid for with the advance money from *The Boats of Morning*. Four days now since she's gone any farther than the row

of mailboxes in the building's lobby. Too hot to go out if she doesn't absolutely have to, eggs frying on sidewalks out there, so she stays half-drunk on Absolut and grapefruit juice, smokes too much and watches black-and-white movies on television. Whatever it takes not to think about the typewriter in her office down the hall from their bedroom, the desk drawer full of blank paper. Margot called on Wednesday night, and they talked for twenty minutes about nothing in particular, which is almost all they ever talk about these days.

"You'd like it here," Margot said. "You'd like the sky here. It's very big and blue."

Late Thursday afternoon, and Alex comes back upstairs with the day's mail, the usual assortment of bills and glossy catalogs, a new *Rolling Stone*, an offer for a platinum Visa card at twenty-one-and-one-half percent interest. And a large padded envelope the color of a grocery bag. Her name and address are printed neatly on the front in tall, blocky letters – MS. ALEX MARLOWE – and there's no return address, only the initials J. S. written very small in the upper left-hand corner. She leaves everything else on the dining table, a small mountain of unopened mail accumulated there already, debts and distractions for Margot to deal with when she gets home. Alex pours herself a drink, then takes the big brown envelope to the sofa in front of the television and opens it with the pull tab on the back. Inside, there's a videocassette, along with a couple of pages of lavender stationary and some newspaper and magazine clippings held together with a lavender paper clip.

Alex sips her drink, the vodka too strong, so she stirs it absently with an index finger and looks down at the top sheet of stationary. It takes her a moment to place the name there – Jude Sinclair – a moment before she remembers the pretty girl from the gallery, dark-skinned, blue-eyed girl who'd tried ardently to explain Albert Perrault's work to her. Alex leans back against the sofa cushions, glancing at the TV screen (an old gangster film she doesn't recognize), and takes another sip from her glass. "Dear Alex," the letter begins, and she notices that it was typed on a typewriter that drops its Ts.

Dear Alex,

I'm sure ha you won' remember me. We alked briefly ahe gallery in May. I was he chick wih a serious hard-on for M. Perraul. I hink I old you

ha I'd wrien poems abouhe "Secunda rais," do you remember ha? I suspec you may have hough I was a flake. Did you know abou P.'s acciden?? errible. I was ahe funeral in Paris. I hough you migh wano read one of he poems (I have burned he oher one). Hope you are well. My love o Margo.

Jude S.

Alex pulls the pages free of the lavender paper clip, places the first page on the bottom, and the second is the poem, the one Jude Sinclair didn't burn. Alex looks at the black videocassette, considers stuffing it all back into the envelope and tossing the whole mess into the garbage can in the kitchen. Perrault's one of the last things she's in the mood to think about right now. She'd almost managed to forget him and his paintings, although Margot talked about him for weeks after the show. They heard about the accident, of course, a motorcycle wreck somewhere in France, and finally, that seemed to close the subject.

Alex takes a long swallow of her drink and scans the first few lines of the short poem, a copy obviously produced on the same typewriter as the letter, the same telltale dropped Ts and a few inky smudges and fingerprints on the lavender stationary.

"Jesus, who the hell still uses carbon paper," she wonders aloud, setting her drink down on the coffee table. Alex starts over and reads the poem through from the beginning. "The Night We Found Red Cap" and then a forced and clumsy attempt at Italian sonnet form, eight-line stanza, six-line stanza, to relay Jude Sinclair's slightly stilted, perfectly unremarkable impressions of the painting.

Alex glances quickly through the clippings: the *Artforum* review of the show at Artifice, a review of another Perrault exhibit last summer in Manhattan, *Le Monde*'s account of his motorcycle accident, and a short French obituary. And at the bottom of the stack, a photocopy of a very old lithograph. She sets the rest aside and stares at it, a pastoral scene centered around some strange animal that resembles a huge wolf more than anything else she can think of, though it's reared up on its hind limbs and its long, sinuous tail makes her think of a big cat, a lion or a panther, maybe. The creature is attacking a young woman, and there are other mutilated bodies scattered about on the ground. In the distance are men on horseback wearing tricorne hats, and the creature has raised its head, is gazing fearlessly over one shoulder towards them. Beneath the scene is the legend,

“La Bête du Gévaudan.” On the back, someone, presumably Jude Sinclair, has scribbled a date in pencil – 1767.

Alex lays the small bundle of paper down on the coffee table and picks up her drink. The glass has left a ring of condensation on the dark wood, the finish already beginning to turn pale and opaque underneath. An heirloom from Margot’s grandmother or a great aunt or some such, and she’ll have a cow when she sees it, so Alex wipes the water away with the hem of her T-shirt. But the ring stays put, a defiant, accusing, condemning tattoo. She sighs, sits back, and takes another swallow of the vodka and grapefruit juice.

“What are you supposed to be, anyway?” she asks the videotape. No label of any sort on it for an answer, but almost certainly more Perraultiana, an interview, possibly, or maybe something a bit more exotic, more morbid, a news report of his accident taped off TF1 or even footage shot during the funeral. Alex wouldn’t be surprised, has seen and heard of worse things being done by art groupies like Jude Sinclair. She decides to save the video for later, a few moments’ diversion before bed, leaves it on the couch, and she goes to fix herself a fresh drink.

Something from the freezer for dinner, prepackaged Chinese that came out of the microwave looking nothing at all like the photograph on the cardboard box, Kung Pao pencil erasers and a bottle of beer, and Alex sits on the living room floor, watching *Scooby Doo* on the Cartoon Network. The end of another day that might as well not have happened, more of yesterday and the day before that, the weeks and months since she’s finished anything at all piling up so fast that soon it’ll have been a year. Today, she stood in the doorway to her office for fifteen minutes and stared uselessly at her typewriter, the vintage Royal she inherited from her father. She’s never been able to write on anything else, the rough clack-clack-clack of steel keys, all the mechanical clicks and clatters and pings to mark her progress down a page, through a scene, the inharmonious chapter-to-chapter symphony towards conclusion and THE END.

When the beer’s gone and she’s swallowed enough of the stuff from the freezer to be convinced that she’s better off not finishing it, Alex slides her plate beneath the coffee table and retrieves Jude Sinclair’s videocassette from the couch. She puts it into the VCR, hits the play button, and in a moment Scooby and Shaggy are replaced by a loud flurry of static. Alex

starts to turn down the volume, but the snow and white noise have already been replaced by a silent black screen. She sits watching it, half-curious, impatient, waiting for whatever it is to begin, whatever the blue-eyed girl from the gallery wants her to see.

In the kitchen, the phone rings, and Alex looks away from the television screen, not particularly interested in talking to anyone, and so she thinks she'll let the machine pick up. On the third ring, she turns back to the TV, but it's still just as dark as before, and she checks to be sure that she doesn't have it on pause by mistake. The soft, green glow of digital letters, play and a flashing arrow to let her know that she doesn't, that either the tape's blank or the recording hasn't begun yet. Or maybe Jude Sinclair's filmed a perfectly dark room as a tribute or eulogy to Perrault.

"This is bullshit," Alex mutters, and she presses fast forward. Now the blackness flickers past as the counter tallies all the minutes of nothing stored on the tape. In the kitchen, the telephone rings once more and then the answering machine switches on, Margot's voice reciting their number, politely informing the caller that no one can come to the phone right now, but if you'll please leave your name and number, the date and time, someone will get back to you as soon as possible.

And then Margot answers herself, her voice sounding small and distant, sounding upset, and "Alex?" she says. "Alex, if you're there please pick up, okay? I need to talk to you."

Alex sighs and rubs at her temples. A bright burst of pain behind her left eye, maybe the beginnings of a migraine, and she's really not up to one of Margot's long-distance crises, the two of them yelling at each other with half a continent in between. She glances back to the television screen, presses play, and the nothing stops flickering.

"Hello? Alex? Come *on*. I know you're at home. Pick up the damned phone, *please*."

It really is blank, she thinks. *The crazy bitch sent me a fucking blank videotape.*

"Alex! I'm not kidding, okay? Please answer the goddamn telephone!"

"Alright! Jesus, I'm *coming*!" she shouts at the kitchen, gets up too fast and one foot knocks over the empty beer bottle. It rolls noisily away towards a bookshelf, leaves behind a glistening, semi-circular trickle of liquid as it goes. By the time Alex lifts the receiver, Margot has started crying.

“*What*? What’s wrong?”

“Christ, Alex. Why can’t you just answer the fucking phone? Why do I have to get fucking hysterical to get you to answer the
phone?”

For a second, Alex considers the simple efficacy of a lie, the harmless convenience of *I was on the toilet*, or *I just walked in the front door*. Any plausible excuse to cover her ass.

“I’m sorry,” she says, instead. “I’ve been in a funk all day long. I’m getting a headache. I just didn’t want to talk to anyone.”

“For fuck’s sake.” Then Margot coughs, and Alex can tell that she’s trying to stop crying.

“Margot, what’s wrong,” Alex asks again. “Has something happened?” She wants a cigarette, but she left them in the living room, left her lighter, too, and she settles for chewing on a ragged thumbnail.

“I saw something today,” Margot says, speaking very quietly. Alex hears her draw a deep breath, the pause as she holds it in a moment, then the long uneven exhalation, before “I saw something terrible today,” she says.

“So what was it? What did you see?”

“A dog attack,” and she’s almost whispering now. “I saw a little girl attacked by a dog.”

For a moment, neither of them says anything, and Alex stares out the window above the kitchen sink at the final indigo and violet dregs of sunset beyond the Atlanta skyline. The pain behind her left eye is back, more persistent than before, keeping time with her heartbeat. She has no idea what to say next, is about to tell Margot that she’s sorry, default sentiment better than nothing, better than standing here as the pain in her head gets bigger, listening to the faint electric buzz and crackle coming through the telephone line.

“I was walking in the park,” Margot says. “Lafontaine, it’s not far from my hotel. This poor little girl, she couldn’t have been more than five. She must have wandered away from her mother – ”

And now Alex realizes that she can hear the faint metallic notes of a music box playing from the next room, something on the video after all. She turns and looks through the doorway at the television screen.

“ – she was dead before anyone could get it off her.”

Grainy blacks and whites, light and shadow, and at first Alex isn't sure what she's seeing, unable to force all those shades of grey into a coherent whole. Movement, chiaroscuro, the swarm of pixels pulled from a magnetized strip of plastic, and then the picture resolves and a young woman's face stares back at Alex from the screen. Pupilless eyes like the whites of hard-boiled eggs, a strand of hair across her cheek, and the music box stops playing. A dog barks.

"Who are you? Your hand is cold – "

"I never saw anything so horrible in my life," Margot says. "The damned thing was *eating* her, Alex."

"Which road will you take?" a guttural voice from the videotape asks the young woman. "That of the needles or that of the pins?"

The pain in Alex's head suddenly doubling, trebling, and she shuts her eyes tight, grips the edge of the counter and waits for the dizziness and nausea to pass, the disorientation that has nothing whatsoever to do with the migraine. The entire world is tilting drunkenly around her. "I have to go," she says. "I'm sorry, Margot. I'll call you back, but I have to go right now."

"Alex, no. *Wait*, please – "

"I promise. I'll call you back as soon as I can." She opens her eyes, hanging up the phone quickly so that she doesn't have to hear the confusion and anger in Margot's voice. The young woman on the television gazes at her blind reflection in the window of her father's house. Her reflection and the less certain reflection of the hunched, dark figure crouched close behind her.

"The road of pins," she says. "Isn't it much easier to fasten things with pins, than to have to sew them together with needles?"

Then the film cuts to a shot of the door of the house – unpainted, weathered boards, the bent and rusted heads of nails, a cross painted on the wood with something white; slow pan left, and now the window is in frame, the clean glint of morning sunlight off glass and the round face of the peasant's daughter, the indistinct shape bending over her, and the camera zooms out until the house is very small, a lonely, run-down speck in a desolate, windswept valley.

Alex hits the stop button, and the VCR whirs and thunks and is silent, the screen filled with nothing now but shoddy, Saturday-morning animation, four hippie teenagers and a Great Dane bouncing along a swampy back road in their psychedelic van, the cartoon sliver moon hung

high in the painted sky, and she sits down on the floor in front of the television.

When she presses eject, the tape slides smoothly, obediently out of the cassette compartment, and Alex reaches for it, holds it in trembling, sweat-slick hands while her heart races and the pain behind her eyes fades to a dull, bearable ache.

In few minutes more, the phone begins to ring again, and this time she doesn't wait for the answering machine.

Incommensurable, impalpable,
Yet latent in it are forms;
Impalpable, incommensurable,
Yet within it are entities.
Shadowy it is and dim.

Lao-tzu, *Tao Te Ching*

The Road of Pins

Another story about my trouble with writer's block. The first time I wrote about Albert Perrault, who's still with me today (though I killed him off a while back). The beginning of my fascination with "lost" films (which came to me by way of Ramsey Campbell's *Ancient Images* (1989) and Tim Lucas' *Throat Sprockets* (1994). My unending fascination with *La Bête du Gévaudan*. Oh, wait. There's a mysterious film in "Salmagundi (New York, 1981)", isn't there?

Onion

Frank was seven years old when he found the fields of red grass growing behind the basement wall. The building on St. Mark's where his parents lived after his father took a job in Manhattan and moved them from the New Jersey suburbs across the wide grey Hudson. And of course he'd been told to stay out of the basement, no place for a child to play because there were rats down there, his mother said, and rats could give you tetanus and rabies. Rats might even be carrying plague, she said, but the sooty blackness at the foot of the stairs was too much temptation for any seven-year-old, the long, long hallway past the door to the super's apartment, and sometimes a single naked bulb burned way down at the end of that hall. Dirty white-yellow stain that only seemed to emphasize the gloom, drawing attention to just how very dark dark could be, and after school Frank would stand at the bottom of the stairs for an hour at a time, peering into the hall that led down to the basement.

"Does your mama know you're always hanging around down here?" Mr. Sweeney would ask whenever he came out and found Frank lurking in the shadows. Frank would squint at the flood of light from Mr. Sweeney's open door, then shrug or mumble the most noncommittal response he could come up with.

"I bet you she don't," Mr. Sweeney would say. "I bet she *don't* know."

"Are there really rats down there?" Frank might ask, and Mr. Sweeney would nod his head, point towards the long hall and say "You better *believe* there's rats. Boy, there's rats under this dump big as German shepherd puppies. They got eyes like acetylene blow torches and teeth like carving knives. Can chew straight through concrete, these rats we got."

"Then why don't you get a cat?" Frank asked once, and Mr. Sweeney laughed, phlegmy old man laugh, and "Oh, we had some cats, boy," he said. "We had whole goddamn cat *armies*, but when these rats get done, ain't never anything left but some gnawed-up bones and whiskers."

"I don't believe that," Frank said. "Rats don't get that big. Rats don't eat cats."

"You better get your skinny rump back upstairs, or they're gonna eat you, too," and then Mr. Sweeney laughed again and slammed his door,

leaving Frank alone in the dark, his heart thumping loud and his head filled with visions of the voracious, giant rats that tunneled through masonry and dined on any cat unlucky enough to get in their way.

And that's the way it went, week after week, month after month, until one snow-blind February afternoon, weather too cold and wet to go outside, and his mother didn't notice when he slipped quietly downstairs with the flashlight she kept in a kitchen drawer. Mr. Sweeney was busy with a busted radiator on the third floor, so nobody around this time to tell him scary stories and chase him home again. Frank walked right on past the super's door, stood shivering in the chilly, mildew-stinking air of the hallway. The unsteady beam of his flashlight to reveal narrow walls that might have been blue or green a long time ago, little black-and-white, six-sided ceramic tiles on the floor, but half of them missing, and he could see the rotting boards underneath. There were doors along the length of the hall, some of them boarded up, nailed shut, one door frame without any door at all, and he stepped very fast past that one.

Indiana Jones wouldn't be afraid, he thought, counting his footsteps in case that might be important later on, listening to the winter wind yowling raw along the street as it swept past the building on its way to Tompkins Square Park and the East River.Twenty steps, twenty-five, thirty-three, and then he was standing below the dangling bulb, and for the first time Frank stopped and looked back the way he'd come. Maybe he'd counted wrong, because it seemed a lot farther than only thirty-three steps back to the dim and postage-stamp-sized splotch of day at the other end of the hall.

Only ten steps more down to the basement door, heavy grey steel door with a rusted hasp and a Yale padlock, but standing wide open like it was waiting for him. Maybe Mr. Sweeney only forgot to lock it the last time he came down to check the furnace or wrap the pipes. Later, Frank wouldn't remember much about crossing the threshold into the deeper night of the basement, the soup-thick stench and taste of dust and rot and mushrooms, picking his way through the maze of sagging shelves and wooden crates, decaying heaps of rags and newspapers, past the ancient furnace crouched in one corner like a cast-iron octopus. Angry, orange-red glow from the furnace grate like the eyes of the super's cat-eating rats – he *would* remember that – and then Frank heard the dry, rustling sound coming from one corner of the basement.

Years later, through high school and college and the slow purgatory of his twenties, *this* is where the bad dreams would always begin, the moment that he lifted the flashlight and saw the wide and jagged crack in the concrete wall. There was a faint draft from that corner that smelled of cinnamon and ammonia, and he *knew* better than to look, knew he should turn and run all the way back because it wasn't ever really rats that he was supposed to be afraid of. The rats just a silly, grown-up lie to keep him safe, smaller, kinder nightmare for his own good. *Run, boy,* Mr. Sweeney whispered inside his head. *Run fast while you still can, while you still don't know.*

But Frank didn't run away, and when he pressed his face to the crack in the wall, he could see that the fields stretched away for miles and miles, crimson meadows beneath a sky the yellow-green of an old bruise. The white trees that writhed and rustled in the choking, spicy breeze, and far, far away, the black enormous thing striding slowly through the grass on bandy, stilt-long legs.

Frank and Willa share the tiny apartment on Mott Street, roachey Chinatown hovel one floor above an apothecary so the place always stinks of ginseng and jasmine and the powdered husks of dried sea creatures. Four walls, a gas range, an ancient Frigidaire that only works when it feels like it. But together they can afford the rent, most of the time, and the month or two they've come up short Mrs. Wu has let them slide. His job at a copy shop and hers waiting tables, and sometimes they talk about moving out of the city, packing up their raggedy-ass belongings and riding a Greyhound all the way to Florida, all the way to the Keys, and then it'll be summer all year long. But not this sticky, sweltering New York summer, no, it would be clean ocean air and rum drinks with paper umbrellas, sun-warm sand and the lullaby roll and crash of waves at night.

Frank is still in bed when Willa comes out of the closet that passes as their bathroom, naked and dripping from the shower, her hair wrapped up in a towel that used to be white, and he stops staring at the tattered Cézanne print thumbtacked over the television and stares at her instead. Willa is tall and her skin's so pale he thought she might be sick the first time they met, so skinny that he can see intimations of her skeleton beneath that skin like milk and pearls. Can trace the blue-green network of veins and capillaries in her throat, between her small breasts, winding like hesitant watercolor

brush strokes down her arms. He's pretty sure that one day Willa will finally figure out she can do a hell of lot better than him and move on, but he tries not to let that ruin whatever it is they have now.

"It's all yours," she says, his turn at the shower, even though the water won't be hot again for at least half an hour, and Willa sits down in a chair near the foot of the bed. She leans forward and rubs vigorously at her hair trapped inside the dingy towel.

"We could both play hooky," Frank says hopefully, watching her, imagining how much better sex would be than the chugging, headache drone of Xerox machines, the endless dissatisfaction of clients. "You could come back to bed, and we could lie here all day. We could just lie here and sweat and watch television."

"Jesus, Frank, how am I supposed to resist an offer like *that*?"

"Okay, so we could screw and sweat and watch television."

She stops drying her hair and glares at him, shakes her head and frowns, but it's the sort of frown that says, *I wish I could* more than it says anything else.

"That new girl isn't working out," she says.

"The fat chick from Kazakhstan?" Frank asks, and he rolls over onto his back, easier to forget the fantasies of a lazy day alone with Willa if he isn't looking at her sitting there naked.

"Fucking *Kazakhstan*. I mean, what the hell were Ted and Daniel thinking? She can't even speak enough English to tell someone where the toilet is, much less take an order."

"Maybe they felt sorry for her," Frank says unhelpfully, and now he's staring up at his favorite crack on the waterstained ceiling, the one that always makes him think of a Viking orbiter photo of the Valles Marineris from one of his old astronomy books. "I've heard that people do that sometimes, feel sorry for people."

"Well, they'd probably lose less money if they just sent the bitch to college, the way she's been pissing off customers."

"Maybe you should suggest that today," and a moment later Willa's wet towel smacks him in the face, steamy-damp terrycloth that smells like her black hair dye and the cheap baby shampoo she uses. It covers his eyes, obscuring his view of the Martian rift valley overhead, but Frank doesn't move the towel immediately, better to lie there a moment longer, breathing her in.

“Is it still supposed to rain today?” Willa asks, and he mumbles through the wet towel that he doesn’t know.

“They keep promising it’s going to rain,” she says. “And it keeps not raining.”

Frank sits up, and the towel slides off his face and into his lap, lies there as the dampness begins to soak through his boxers.

“I don’t know,” he says again. Willa has her back turned to him, and she doesn’t reply or make any sign to show that she’s heard. She’s pulling a bright yellow T-shirt on over her head, the Curious George shirt he gave her for Christmas, and has put on a pair of yellow panties, too.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “It’s the heat. The heat’s driving me crazy.”

Frank glances towards the window, the sash up but the chintzy curtains hanging limp and lifeless in the stagnant July air. He’d have to get out of bed, walk all the way across the room, lean over the sill and peer up past the walls and rooftops to see if there are any clouds. “It might rain today,” he says.

“I don’t think it’s ever going to rain again as long as I live,” Willa says and steps into her jeans. “I think we’ve broken this goddamn planet, and it’s never going to rain anywhere, ever again.”

Frank rubs his fingers through his stiff, dirty hair and looks back at the Cézanne still life above the television – a tabletop, the absinthe bottle and a carafe of water, an empty glass, the fruit that might be peaches.

“You’ll be at the meeting tonight?” he asks, and Frank keeps his eyes on the print because he doesn’t like the sullen, secretive expression Willa gets whenever they have to talk about the meetings.

“Yeah,” she says, sighs, and then there’s the cloth-and-metal sound of her zipper. “Of course I’ll be at the meeting. Where the hell else would I be?”

And then she goes back into the bathroom and shuts the door behind her, leaves Frank alone with Cézanne and the exotic reek of the apothecary downstairs, Valles Marineris and the bright day spilling uninvited through the window above Mott Street.

Half past two, and Frank sits on a plastic milk crate in the stockroom of Gotham Kwick Kopy, trying to decide whether or not to eat the peanut butter and honey sandwich he brought for lunch. The air conditioning’s on the blink again, and he thinks it might actually be hotter inside the shop

than out on the street. A few merciful degrees cooler in the stockroom, though, a shadowy refuge stacked high with cardboard boxes of copy paper in a dozen shades of white and all the colors of a pastel rainbow. He peels back the top of his sandwich, the doughy Millbrook bread that Willa likes, and frowns at the mess underneath. So hot out front that the peanut butter has melted, an oily mess to leak straight through wax paper and the brown bag, and he's trying to remember if peanut butter and honey can spoil.

Both the stockroom doors swing open, and Frank looks up, blinks and squints at the sun-framed silhouette, Joe Manske letting in the heat.

"Hey, don't do that," Frank says as Joe switches on the lights. The fluorescents buzz and flicker uncertainly, chasing away the shadows, drenching the stockroom in their bland, indifferent glare.

"Dude, why are you sitting back here in the dark?" Joe asks, and for a moment Frank considers throwing the sandwich at him.

"Why aren't you working on that Mac?" Frank asks right back.

"It's fixed, good as new, " Joe says, grins his big, stupid grin and sits down on a box of laser-print paper near the door.

"That fucker won't *ever* be good as new again."

"Well, at least it's stopped making that sound. That's good enough for me." Joe takes out a pack of Camels, offers one to Frank, and Frank shakes his head *no*. A month now since his last cigarette, quitting because Willa's stepmother is dying of lung cancer, quitting because cigarettes cost too goddamn much, anyhow. "Thanks, though," he says.

"Whatever," Joe Manske mumbles around the filter of his Camel, thumb on the strike wheel of his silver lighter, and in a moment the air is filled with the pungent aroma of burning tobacco. Frank gives up on the dubious sandwich, drops it back into the brown bag and crumples the bag into a greasy ball.

"I fuckin' hate this fuckin' job," Joe says, disgusted, smoky cloud of words hanging about his head, and he points at the stockroom doors with his cigarette. "You just missed a real piece of work, man."

"Yeah?" Frank tosses the sandwich ball towards the big plastic garbage can sitting a few feet away, misses, and it rolls behind the busted Canon 2400 color copier that's been sitting in the same spot since he started this job a year ago.

"Yeah," Joe says. "I was trying to finish that pet store job and this dude comes in, little bitty old man looks like he just got off the boat from Poland

or Armenia or some Balkan shit – ”

“My grandfather was Polish,” Frank says, and Joe sighs loudly, a long impatient sigh. He flicks ash onto the cement floor.

“You *know* what I mean,” Joe says.

“So what’d he want, anyway?” Frank asks, not because he cares, but the shortest way through any conversation with Joe Manske is usually right down the middle, just be quiet and listen, and sooner or later he’ll probably come to the end and shut up.

“He had this *old* book with him. The damned thing must have been even older than him, and it was falling apart. I don’t think you could so much as look at it without the pages crumbling. Had it tied together with some string, right, and he kept askin’ me all these questions, real technical shit about the machines, you know.”

“Yeah? Like what?”

“Dude, I don’t know. I can’t remember half of it, techie shit, like I was friggin’ Mr. Wizard or Bill Gates or somethin’. I finally just told him we couldn’t be responsible if the copiers messed up his old book, but he still kept on askin’ these questions. Lucky for me, one of the self-service machines jammed, and I told him I had to go fix it. By the time I was finished, he was gone.”

“You live to serve,” Frank says, wondering if Willa would be able to tell if he had just one cigarette. “The customer is always right.”

“Fuck that shit,” Joe Manske says. “I don’t get paid enough to have to listen to some senile old fart jabberin’ at me all day.”

“Yes, sir, helpful is your middle name.”

“Fuck you.”

Frank laughs and gets up, pushes the milk crate towards the wall with the toe of one shoe so no one’s going to come along later and trip over it, break their neck and have him to blame. “I better get back to work,” he says.

“You do that,” Joe grumbles and puffs his Camel.

Through the stockroom doors and back out into the stifling, noisy clutter of the shop. It must be at least ten degrees warmer out here, he thinks. There’s a line at the register and the phone’s ringing, no one out front but Maggie, and she glowers at him across the chaos.

“I’m on it,” Frank says. She shakes her head doubtfully and turns to help a woman wearing a dark purple dress and matching beret. Frank’s

reaching across the counter for the telephone receiver when he notices a business card lying near a display of Liquid Paper. Black sans-serif print on an expensive white cotton card stock and what appears to be an infinity symbol printed in the lower left-hand corner. FOUND: LOST WORLDS centered at the top, TERRAE NOVUM ET TERRAE INDETERMINATA on the next line down in smaller letters. Then a name and an address – Dr. Solomon Monalisa, PhD, 43 W. 61st St., Manhattan – but no number or e-mail, and Frank picks up the card, holds it so Maggie can see.

"Where'd this come from?" he asks, but she only shrugs, annoyed but still smiling her strained and weary smile for the woman in the purple beret. "Beats me. Ask Joe, if he ever comes back. Now, will you *please* answer the phone?"

He apologizes, lifts the receiver, "Gotham Kwick Kopy, Frank speaking. How may I help you?" and slips the white card into his back pocket.

The group meets in the basement of a synagogue on Eldridge Street. Once a month, eight o'clock until everyone who wants to talk has taken his or her turn, coffee and stale doughnuts before and afterwards. Metal folding chairs and a lectern down front, a microphone and crackly PA system even though the room isn't really large enough to need one. Never more than fourteen or fifteen people, occasionally as few as six or seven, and Frank and Willa always sit at the very back, near the door. Sometimes Willa doesn't make it all the way through a meeting. She says she hates the way they all watch her if she gets up to leave early, like she's done something wrong, she says, like this is all her fault, somehow. So they sit by the door, which is fine with Frank; he'd rather not have everyone staring at the back of his head, anyway.

He's sipping at a styrofoam cup of the bitter black coffee, three sugars and it's still bitter, watching the others, all their familiar telltale quirks and peculiarities, their equivocal glances, when Willa comes in. First the sound of her clunky motorcycle boots on the concrete steps, and then she lingers in the doorway a moment, that expression like it's always the first time for her and it can never be any other way.

"Hey," Frank says quietly. "Yeah, I made it," she replies and sits down beside him. There's a stain on the front of her Curious George T-shirt that looks like chocolate sauce.

“How was your day?” he asks her, talking so she doesn’t lock up before things even get started.

“Same as ever. It sucked. They didn’t fire Miss Kazakhstan.”

“That’s good, dear. Would you like a martini?” and he jabs a thumb towards the free-coffee-and-stale-doughnut table. “I think I’ll pass,” Willa says humorlessly, rubbing her hands together and stares at the floor between her feet. “I think my stomach hurts enough already.”

“Would you rather just go home? We can miss one night. I sure as hell don’t care – ”

“*No,*” she says, answering too fast, too emphatically, so he knows she means yes. “That would be silly. I’ll be fine when things get started.”

And then Mr. Zaroba stands, stocky man with skin like tea-stained muslin, salt-and-pepper hair and beard and his bushy grey eyebrows. Kindly blue grandfather eyes, and he raises one hand to get everyone’s attention, as if they aren’t all looking at him already, as if they haven’t all been waiting for him to open his mouth and break the tense, uncertain silence.

“Good evening, everyone,” he says, and Willa sits up a little straighter in her chair, that expectant arch of her back as though she’s getting ready to run.

“Before we begin,” Mr. Zaroba continues, “there’s something I wanted to share. I came across this last week.” He takes a piece of paper from his shirt pocket, unfolds it, and begins to read. An item from the *New York Tribune*, February 17th, 1901. Reports by an Indian tribe in Alaska of a city in the sky that was seen sometimes, and a prospector named Willoughby who claimed to have witnessed the thing himself in 1897, claimed to have tried to photograph it on several occasions and succeeded, finally.

“And now this,” Zaroba says, and he pulls a second folded sheet of paper from his shirt pocket, presto, bottomless bag of tricks, that pocket, and this time he reads from a book, *Alaska* by Miner Bruce, page 107, he says. Someone else who saw the city suspended in the arctic sky, a Mr. C. W. Thornton of Seattle. “‘It required no effort of the imagination to liken it to a city,’” Mr. Zaroba reads, “‘but was so distinct that it required, instead, faith to believe that it was not in reality a city.’”

People shift nervously in their seats, scuff their feet, and someone whispers too loudly.

“I have the prospector’s photograph,” Zaroba says. “It’s only a Xerox from the book, of course. It isn’t very clear, but I thought some of you might like to see it,” and he hands one of the sheets of paper to the person sitting nearest him.

“Damn, I need a cigarette,” Willa whispers.

“You and me both,” Frank whispers back. It takes almost five minutes for the sheet of paper to make its way to the rear of the room, passed along from hand to hand to hand while Zaroba stands patiently at the front, his head bowed solemnly as if leading a prayer. Some hold onto it as long as they dare and others hardly seem to want to touch it. A man three rows in front of them gets up and brings it back to Willa.

“I don’t see nothing but clouds,” he says, sounding disappointed.

And neither does Frank, fuzzy photograph of a mirage, deceit of sunlight in the collision of warm and freezing air high above a glacier, but Willa must see more. She holds the paper tight and chews at her lower lip, tracing the distorted peaks and cumulonimbus towers with the tip of an index finger.

“My god,” she whispers.

In a moment, Zaroba comes up the aisle and takes the picture away, leaves Willa staring at her empty hands, her eyes wet like she might start crying. Frank puts an arm around her bony shoulders, but she immediately wiggles free and scoots her chair a few inches farther away.

“So, who wants to get us started tonight?” Mr. Zaroba asks when he gets back to the lectern. At first no one moves or speaks or raises a hand, each looking at the others or trying hard to look nowhere at all. And then a young woman stands up, younger than Willa, filthy clothes and bruise-dark circles under her eyes, hair that hasn’t been combed or washed in ages. Her name is Janice, and Frank thinks that she’s a junkie, probably a heroin addict because she always wears long sleeves.

“Janice? Very good, then,” and Mr. Zaroba returns to his seat in the first row. Everyone watches Janice as she walks slowly to the front of the room, or they pretend not to watch her. There’s a small hole in the seat of her dirty threadbare jeans, and Frank can see that she isn’t wearing underwear. She stands behind the lectern, coughs once, twice, and brushes her shaggy bangs out of her face. She looks anxiously at Mr. Zaroba.

“It’s all right, Janice,” he says. “Take all the time you need. No one’s going to rush you.”

“Bullshit,” Willa mutters, loud enough that the man sitting three rows in front of them turns and scowls. “What the hell are you staring at,” she growls, and the man turns back towards the lectern.

“It’s okay, baby,” Frank says and takes her hand, squeezes hard enough that she can’t shake him loose this time. “We can leave anytime you want.”

Janice coughs again, and there’s a faint feedback whine from the mike. She wipes her nose with the back of her hand. “I was only fourteen years old,” she begins. “I still lived with my foster parents in Trenton, and there was this old cemetery near our house, Riverview Cemetery. Me and my sister, my foster sister, we used to go there to smoke and talk, you know, just to get away from the house.”

Janice looks at the basement ceiling while she speaks, or down at the lectern, but never at the others. She pauses and wipes her nose again.

“We went there all the time. Wasn’t anything out there to be afraid of, not like at home. Just dead people, and me and Nadine weren’t afraid of dead people. Dead people don’t hurt anyone, right? We could sit there under the trees in the summer, and it was almost like things weren’t so bad. Nadine was almost a year older than me.”

Willa tries to pull her hand free, digging her nails into Frank’s palm, but he doesn’t let go. They both know where this is going, have both heard Janice’s story so many times they could recite it backwards, same tired old horror story. “It’s okay,” he says out loud, to Willa or to himself.

“Mostly it was just regular headstones, but there were a few big crypts set way back near the water. I didn’t like being around them. I told her that, over and over, but Nadine said they were like little castles, like something out of fairy tales.

“One day one of them was open. Maybe someone had busted into it, and Nadine had to see if there were still bones inside. I begged her not to, said whoever broke it open might still be hanging around somewhere, and we ought to go home and come back later. But she wouldn’t listen to me. I didn’t want to look inside. I swear to God, I didn’t.”

“*Liar,*” Willa whispers, so low now that the man three rows in front of them doesn’t hear, but Frank does. Her nails are digging deeper into his palm, and his eyes are beginning to water from the pain. “*You* wanted to see,” she says. “Just like the rest of us, you wanted to see.”

“I said, ‘What if someone’s still in there?’ but she wouldn’t listen. She wasn’t ever afraid of anything. She used to lay down on train tracks just to

piss me off."

"What did you see in the crypt, Janice, when you and Nadine looked inside?" Mr. Zaroba asks, but there's no hint of impatience in his voice, not hurrying her or prompting, only helping her find a path across the words as though they were slippery rocks in a cold stream. "Can you tell us?"

Janice takes a very deep breath and swallows. "Stairs," she says. "Stairs going down into the ground. There was a light way down at the bottom, a blue light, like a cop car light. Only it wasn't flashing. And we could hear something moving around down there, and something else that sounded like a dog panting. I tried to get Nadine to come back to the house with me then, but she wouldn't. She said 'Those stairs might go *anywhere*, Jan. Don't you want to *see*? Don't you want to *know*?'"

Another pause, and "I couldn't stop her," Janice says.

Willa mutters something Frank doesn't understand, then, something vicious, and he lets go of her hand, rubs at the four crescent-shaped wounds her nails leave behind. Blood drawn, crimson tattoos to mark the wild and irreparable tear in her soul by marking him. He presses his palm to his black work pants, no matter if it stains, no one will ever notice.

"I waited at the top of the stairs until dark," Janice says. "I kept on calling her. I called her until my throat hurt. When the sun started going down, the blue light at the bottom got brighter, and once or twice I thought I could see someone moving around down there, someone standing between me and the light. Finally, I yelled I was going to get the goddamn cops if she didn't come back…" Janice trails off, hugging herself like she's cold and gazes straight ahead, but Frank knows she doesn't see any of them sitting there, watching her, waiting for the next word, waiting for *their* turns at the lectern.

"You don't have to say any more tonight," Zaroba tells her. "You know we'll all understand if you can't."

"No," Janice says. "I *can*… I really *need* to," and she squeezes her eyes shut tight. Mr. Zaroba stands and takes one reassuring step towards the lectern.

"We're all right here," he says.

"We're *listening*," Willa mumbles mockingly.

"We're listening," Zaroba says a second later.

"I didn't go get the police. I didn't tell anyone anything until the next day. My foster parents, they just thought she'd run away again. No one

would believe me when I told them about the crypt, when I told them where Nadine had really gone. Finally, they made me show them, though, the cops did, so I took them out to Riverview."

"Why do we always have to fucking start with her?" Willa whispers. "I can't remember a single time she didn't go first."

Someone sneezes.

"It was sealed up again," Janice says, her small and brittle voice made big and brittle by the PA speakers. "But they opened it. The cemetery people didn't want them to, but they did anyway. I swore I'd kill myself if they didn't open it and get Nadine out of there."

"Can *you* remember a time she didn't go first?" Willa asks, and Frank looks at her, but he doesn't answer.

"All they found inside was a coffin. The cops even pulled up part of the marble floor, but there wasn't anything under it. Just dirt."

A few more minutes, a few more details, and Janice is done. Mr. Zaroba hugs her, and she goes back to her seat. "Who wants to be next?" he asks them, and it's the man who calls himself Charlie Jones, though they all know that's not his real name. Every month he apologizes because he can't use his real name at the meetings, too afraid someone at work might find out, and then he tells them about the time he opened a bedroom door in his house in Hartford, and there was nothing on the other side but stars. When he's done, Zaroba shakes his hand, pats him on the back, and now it's time for the woman who got lost once on the subway. Two hours just to get from South Ferry to the Houston Street station, alone in an empty train that rushed along through a darkness filled with the sound of children crying. Then a timid Colombian woman named Juanita Lazarte, the night she watched two moons cross the sky above Peekskill, the morning she watched the sun rise in the south.

And all the others, each in his or her turn, as the big wall clock behind the lectern ticks and the night fills up with the weight and absurdity of their stories, glimpses of impossible geographies, entire worlds hidden in plain view if you're unlucky enough to see them. "If you're damned," Juanita Lazarte once said and quickly crossed herself. Mr. Zaroba is there whenever anyone locks up, his blue eyes and gentle ministrations, Zaroba who was once an atmospheric scientist and pilot for the Navy. He's seen something, too, of course, in the summer of 1969, flying supplies in a Hercules C-130 from Christchurch, New Zealand to McMurdo Station. A freak storm,

whiteout conditions and instrument malfunction, and when they finally found a break in the clouds somewhere over the Transantarctic Mountains, the entire crew saw the ruins of a vast city, glittering obsidian towers and shattered crystal spires, crumbling walls carved from the mountains themselves. At least that's what Zaroba says. He also says the Navy pressured the other men into signing papers agreeing never to talk about the flight, and when he refused, he was pronounced mentally unsound by a military psychiatrist and discharged.

When Willa's turn comes, she glances at Frank, not a word but all the terrible things right there in her eyes for him to see, unspoken resignation, surrender, and then she goes down the aisle and stands behind the lectern.

Frank wakes from a dream of rain and thunder, and Willa's sitting cross-legged at the foot of their bed, nothing on but her pajama bottoms, watching television with the sound off and smoking a cigarette. "Where the hell'd you get that?" he asks, blinking sleepily, and points at the cigarette.

"I bought a pack on my break today," she replies, not taking her eyes off the screen. She takes a long drag, and the smoke leaks slowly from her nostrils.

"I thought we had an agreement. Didn't we have an agreement?"

"I'm sorry," but she doesn't sound sorry at all. Frank sits up and blinks at the TV screen, rubs his eyes, and now he can see it's Jimmy Stewart and Katharine Hepburn in *The Philadelphia Story*.

"You can turn the sound up, if you want to," he says. "It won't bother me."

"No, that's okay. I know it by heart, anyway."

Then neither of them says anything else for a few minutes, they sit watching the television, and when Willa has smoked the cigarette down to the filter she stubs it out in a saucer.

"I don't think I want to go to the meetings anymore," she says. "I think they're only making it worse for me."

Frank waits a moment before he replies, waiting to be sure that she's finished, and then he tells her, "That's your decision, Willa. If that's what you want."

"Of course it's my decision."

"You know what I meant."

"I can't keep reciting it over and over like the rest of you. There's no fucking point. I could talk about it from now till doomsday, and it still

wouldn’t make sense, and I’d still be afraid. Nothing Zaroba and that bunch of freaks has to say is going to change that, Frank.”

Willa picks up the pack of Camels off the bed, lights another cigarette with a disposable lighter that looks pink by the flickering, grainy light from the TV screen.

“I’m sorry,” Frank says.

“Does it help you?” she asks, and now there’s an angry, sharp edge in her voice, Willa’s switchblade mood swings, sullen to pissed in the space between heartbeats. “Has it *ever* helped you at all? Even once?”

Frank doesn’t want to fight with her tonight, wants to close his eyes and slip back down to sleep, back to his rain-cool dreams. It’s too hot for an argument. “I don’t know,” he says, and that’s almost not a lie.

“Yeah, well, whatever,” Willa mumbles and takes another drag off her cigarette.

“We’ll talk about it in the morning if you want,” Frank says, and he lies back down, turning to face the open window and the noise of Mott Street at two am, the blinking orange neon from a noodle shop across the street.

“I’m not going to change my mind, if that’s what you mean,” Willa says.

“You can turn the sound up,” Frank tells her again and concentrates on the soothing rhythm of the noodle shop sign, orange pulse like campfire light, much, much better than counting imaginary sheep. In a moment, he’s almost asleep again, scant inches from sleep.

“Did you ever see *Return to Oz*?” Willa asks him.

“What?”

“*Return to Oz*, the one where Fairuza Balk plays Dorothy and Piper Laurie plays Auntie Em.”

“No,” Frank replies. “I never did,” and he rolls over onto his back and stares at the ceiling instead of the neon sign. In the dark and the grey light from the television, his favorite crack looks even more like Mars.

“It wasn’t anything like *The Wizard of Oz*. I was just a little kid, but I remember it. It scared the hell out of me.”

“Your mother let you see scary movies when you were a little kid?”

Willa ignores the question, her eyes still fixed on *The Philadelphia Story* if they’re fixed anywhere, and she exhales a cloud of smoke that swirls and drifts about above the bed.

“When the film begins, Auntie Em and Uncle Henry think that Dorothy’s sick,” she says. “They think she’s crazy, because she talks about Oz all the time, because she won’t believe it was only a nightmare. They finally send her off to a sanitarium for electric shock treatment – ”

“Fuck,” Frank says, not entirely sure that Willa isn’t making all this up. “That’s horrible.”

“Yeah, but it’s true, isn’t it? It’s what really happens to little girls who see places that aren’t supposed to be there. People aren’t ever so glad you didn’t die in a twister that they want to listen to crazy shit about talking scarecrows and emerald cities.”

Frank doesn’t answer because he knows he isn’t supposed to, knows that she would rather he didn’t even try, so he sweats and stares at his surrogate, plaster Mars instead, at the shadowplay from the television screen. She doesn’t say anything else, and in a little while more, he’s asleep.

In this dream there is still thunder, no rain from the ocher sky but the crack and rumble of thunder so loud that the air shimmers and could splinter like ice. The tall red grass is almost as high as his waist, rippling gently in the wind, and Frank wishes that Willa wouldn’t get so close to the fleshy white trees. She thinks they might have fruit, peaches, and she’s never eaten a white peach before, she said. Giants fighting in the sky, and Willa picking up windfall fruit from the rocky ground beneath the trees. Frank looks over his shoulder, back towards the fissure in the basement wall, back the way they came, but it’s vanished. The wall and the fissure.

I should be sacred, he thinks. *No, I should be* scared.

And now Willa is coming back towards him through the crimson waves of grass, her skirt for a linen basket to hold all the pale fruit she’s gathered. She’s smiling, and he tries to remember the last time he saw her smile, *really* smile, not just a smirk or a sneer. She smiles and steps through the murmuring grass that seems to part to let her pass, her bare arms and legs safe from the blades grown sharp as straight razors.

“They *are* peaches,” she beams.

But the fruit is the color of school-room chalk, its skin smooth and slick and glistening with tiny pinhead beads of nectar seeping out through minute pores. “Take one,” she says, but his stomach lurches and rolls at the thought, loathe to even touch one of the things. She sighs and dumps them all into the grass at his feet.

“I used to know a story about peaches,” Willa says. “It was a Japanese story, I think. Or maybe it was Chinese.”

“I’m pretty sure those *aren’t* peaches,” Frank says, and he takes a step backwards, away from the pile of sweating albino fruit.

“I heard the pits are poisonous,” she says. “Arsenic, or maybe it’s cyanide.”

A brilliant flash of chartreuse lightning, then, and the sky sizzles and smells like charred meat. Willa bends and retrieves a piece of the fruit, takes a bite before he can stop her. The sound of her teeth sinking through its skin, tearing through the colorless pulp inside, is louder than the thunder, and milky juice rolls down her chin and stains her Curious George T-shirt. Something wriggles from between her lips, falls to the grass, and when Willa opens her jaws wide to take another bite Frank can see that her mouth is *filled* with wriggling things.

“They have to be careful you don’t swallow your tongue,” she says, mumbling around the white peach. “If you swallow your tongue, you’ll choke to death.”

Frank snatches the fruit away from her, grabs it quick before she puts any more of it in her belly, and she frowns and wipes the juice staining her hands off onto her skirt. The half-eaten thing feels warm, and he tosses it away.

“Jesus, that was fucking silly, Frank. The harm’s already done, *you* know that. The harm was done the day you looked through that hole in the wall.”

And then the sky booms its symphony of gangrene and sepsis, and lightning stabs down at the world with electric claws, thunder then lightning, that’s only the wrong way round if he pretends Willa isn’t right, if he pretends that he’s seven again, and this time he doesn’t take the flashlight from the kitchen drawer. This time he does what his mother says and doesn’t go sneaking off the minute she turns her back.

Frank stands alone beneath the restless trees, his aching, dizzy head too full of all the time that can’t be redeemed, now or then or ever, and he watches as Willa walks alone across the red fields towards the endless deserts of scrap iron and bone, towards the bloated scarlet-purple sun. The enormous black things have noticed her and creep along close behind, stalking silent on ebony mantis legs.

This time, he wakes up before they catch her.

The long weekend, then, hotter and drier, the sky more white than blue, and the air on Mott Street and everywhere else that Frank has any reason to go has grown so ripe, so redolent, that sometimes he pulls the collars of his T-shirts up over his mouth and nose, breathing through the cotton like a surgeon or a wild-west bandit. But the smell always gets through anyway. On the news, there are people dying of heatstroke and dehydration, people dying in the streets and ERs, but fresh-faced weathermen still promise that it will rain very soon. He's stopped believing them, and maybe that means that Willa's right and it never will rain again.

Frank hasn't shown the white card – FOUND: LOST WORLDS – to Willa, keeps it hidden in his wallet, only taking it out when he's alone and no one will see, no one to ask where or what or who. He's read it over and over again, has each line committed to memory, and Monday morning he almost calls Mr. Zaroba about it. The half hour between Willa leaving for the cafe and the time that he has to leave for the copy shop if he isn't going to be late, and he holds the telephone receiver and stares at Dr. Solomon Monalisa's card lying there on the table in front of him. The sound of his heart, the dial-tone drone, and the traffic down on Mott Street, the spice-and-dried-fish odor of the apothecary leaking up through the floorboards, and a fat drop of sweat slides down his forehead and spreads itself painfully across his left eyeball. By the time he's finished rubbing at his eye, calling Zaroba no longer seems like such a good idea after all, and Frank puts the white card back into his wallet, slipping it in safe between his driver's license and a dog-eared, expired MetroCard.

Instead he calls in sick, gets Maggie, and she doesn't believe for one moment that there's anything at all wrong with him.

"I fucking swear, I can't even get up off the toilet long enough to make a phone call. I'm calling *you* from the head." He makes only half an effort at sounding sincere because they both know this is only going through the motions.

"As we speak – " he starts, but Maggie cuts him off.

"That's enough, Frank. But I'm telling you, man, if you wanna keep this job, you better get your slacker ass down here tomorrow morning."

"Right," Frank says. "I hear you," and she hangs up first.

And then Frank stares at the open window, the sun beating down like the Voice of God out there, and it takes him almost five minutes to

remember where to find the next number he has to call.

Sidney McAvoy stopped coming to the meetings at the synagogue on Eldridge Street almost a year ago, not long after Frank's first time. A small, hawk-nosed man with nervous, ferrety eyes, and he's always reminded Frank a little of Dustin Hoffman in *Papillon*. Some sort of tension or wound between Sidney and Mr. Zaroba that Frank has never fully understood, but he saw it from the start, the way their eyes never met. Sidney never took his turn at the lectern, sat silent, brooding, chewing the stem of a cheap, unlit pipe. And then there was an argument after one of the meetings, the same night that Zaroba told Janice that she shouldn't ever go back to the cemetery in Trenton, that she should never try to find the staircase and the blue light again. Both men speaking in urgent, angry whispers, Zaroba looking up occasionally to smile a sheepish, embarrassed, apologetic smile. Everyone pretending not to see or hear, talking among themselves, occupied with their stale doughnuts and tiny packets of non-dairy creamer, and then Sidney McAvoy left and never came back.

Frank would've forgotten all about him, almost had forgotten, and then one night he and Willa were coming home late from a bar where they drink sometimes, whenever they're feeling irresponsible enough to spend money on booze. Cheap vodka or cheaper beer, a few hours wasted just trying to feel like everyone else, the way they imagined other, normal people might feel, and they ran into Sidney McAvoy a few blocks from their apartment. He was wearing a ratty green raincoat, even though it wasn't raining, and chewing on one of his pipes, carrying a large box wrapped in white butcher's paper, tied up tight and neat with twine.

"Shit," Willa whispered. "Make like you don't see him," but Sidney had already noticed them, and he was busy clumsily trying to hide the big package behind his back.

"I *know* you two," he declared, talking loudly, a suspicious, accusatory glint to his quavering voice. "You're both with Zaroba, aren't you? You still go to his *meetings*." That last word a sneer, and he pointed a short, grubby finger at the center of Frank's chest.

"That's really none of your goddamn business, is it?" Willa growled, and Frank stepped quickly between them; she mumbled and spit curses behind his back. Sidney McAvoy glared up at Frank with his beady eyes. A

whole lifetime's worth of bitterness and distrust trapped inside those eyes, eyes that have seen far too much or far too little.

"How have you been, Mr. McAvoy?" Frank said, straining to sound friendly, and he managed the sickly ghost of a smile.

Sidney grunted and almost dropped his carefully-wrapped package.

"If you *care* about that girl there," he said, speaking around the stem of the pipe clenched between his yellowed teeth, "you'll keep her away from Zaroba. And you'll both stop *telling* him things, if you know what's good for you. There are more useful answers in a road atlas than you're ever going to get out of that old phony."

"What makes you say that?" Frank asked. "What were you guys fighting about?" but Sidney was already scuttling away down Canal Street, his white package hugged close to his chest. He turned a corner without looking back, and was gone.

"Fucking nut job," Willa mumbled. "What the hell's his problem, anyway?"

"Maybe the less we know about him the better," Frank said. He put an arm around Willa's small waist, holding her close to him, trying hard not to think about what could have been in the box, but unable to think of anything else.

Two weeks later, the dim and snowy last day before Thanks-
giving, Frank found Sidney McAvoy's number in the phone book and called him.

A wet comb through his hair, cleaner shirt and socks, and Frank goes out into the sizzling day; across Columbus Park to the Canal Street Station, and he takes the M to Grand Street, rides the B line all the way to the subway stop beneath the Museum of Natural History. Rumbling along through the honeycombed earth, the diesel and dust and garbage-scented darkness and him swaddled inside steel and unsteady fluorescent light. Time to think that he'd rather not have, unwelcome luxury of second thoughts, and when the train finally reaches the museum, he's almost ready to turn right around and head back downtown. Almost, but Dr. Solomon Monalisa's card is in his wallet to keep him moving, to get him off the train and up the concrete steps to the museum entrance. Ten dollars he can't spare to get inside, but Sidney McAvoy will never agree to meet him

anywhere outside. The man's far too paranoid for a walk in Central Park or a quiet booth in a deli or a coffee shop somewhere.

"People are always listening," he says, whenever Frank has suggested or asked that they meet somewhere without an entrance fee. "You never know what they might overhear."

So sometimes it's the long marble bench in front of the *Apatosaurus*, or the abyssal blue-black gloom of the Hall of Fishes, seats beneath a planetarium-constellation sky, whichever spot happens to strike Sidney's fancy that particular day. His fancy or his cabalistic fantasies, if there's any difference. Today Frank finds him in the Hall of Asiatic Mammals, this short and rumpled man in a worn-out tweed jacket and red tennis shoes standing alone before the Indian leopard diorama, gazing intently in at the pocket of counterfeit jungle and the taxidermied cats. Frank waits behind him for a minute or two, waiting to be noticed, and when Sidney looks up and speaks, he speaks to Frank's reflection in the glass.

"I'm very busy today," he says, brusque, impatient. "I hope this isn't going to take long."

And no, Frank says, it won't take long at all, I promise, but Sidney's doubtful expression to show just how much he believes that. He sighs and looks back to the stuffed leopards, papier-mâché trees and wax leaves, a painted flock of peafowl rising to hang forever beneath a painted forest canopy. Snapshot moment of another world. The walls of the dimly-lit hall lined with a dozen or more such scenes.

"You want to know about Monalisa," Sidney says. "That's why you came here, because you think I can tell you who he is."

"Yeah," Frank admits and reaches into his pocket for his wallet. "He came into the place where I work last week and left this." He takes out the card, and Sidney turns around only long enough to snatch it from him.

"So, you talked to him?"

"No, I didn't. I was eating my lunch in the stockroom. I didn't actually see him for myself."

Sidney stares at the card. He seems to read it carefully three or four times, and then he hands it back to Frank and goes back to staring at the leopards.

"Why didn't you show this to Zaroba?" he asks sarcastically, tauntingly, but Frank answers him anyway, not in the mood today for Sidney's grudges and intrigues.

“Because I didn’t think he’d tell me anything. You know he’s more interested in the mysteries than ever finding answers.” Frank pauses, silent for a moment, and Sidney’s silent, too, both men watching the big cats now – glass eyes, freeze-frame talons, and taut, spectacled haunches – as though the leopards might suddenly spring towards them, all this stillness just a clever ruse for the tourists and the kiddies. Maybe dead leopards know the nervous, wary faces of men who have seen things that they never should have seen.

“He knows the truth would swallow him whole,” Sidney says. The leopards don’t pounce, and he adds, “He knows he’s a coward.”

“So who is Dr. Monalisa?”

“A bit of something the truth already swallowed and spat back up,” and Sidney chuckles sourly to himself and produces one of his pipes from a pocket of the tweed jacket. “He thinks himself a navigator, a pilot, a cartographer…”

Frank notices that one of the two leopards has captured a stuffed peacock, holds it fast between velvet, razored paws, and he can’t remember if it was that way only a moment before.

“He draws maps,” Sidney says. “He catalogs doors and windows and culverts.”

“That’s bullshit,” Frank whispers, his voice low now so the old woman staring in at the giant panda exhibit won’t hear him. “You’re trying to tell me he can *find* places?”

“He isn’t a sane man, Frank,” Sidney says, and now he holds up his left hand and presses his palm firmly against the glass, as if he’s testing the invisible barrier, gauging its integrity. “He has answers, but he has prices, too. You think *this* is Hell, you wait and see how it feels to be in debt to Dr. Solomon Monalisa.”

“It isn’t me. It’s Willa. I think she’s starting to lose it.”

“We all lost *it* a long time ago, Frank.”

“I’m afraid she’s going to do something. I’m afraid she’ll hurt herself.”

And Sidney turns his back on the leopards, then, takes the pipe from his mouth, and glares up at Frank. But some of the anger, some of the bitterness, has gone from his eyes.

“He *might* keep her alive,” he says, “but you wouldn’t want her back when he was done. If she’d even *come* back. No, Frank. You two stay away from Monalisa. Look for your own answers. You don’t think you found that

card by accident, do you? You don't really think there are such things as coincidences? *That's* not even his real address – "

"She can't sleep anymore," Frank says, but now Sidney McAvoy isn't listening. He glances back over his shoulder at the Indian rain forest, incandescent daylight, illusory distances. "I have to go now," he says abruptly. "I'm very busy today."

"I think she's fucking *dying*, man," Franks says as Sidney straightens his tie and puts the pipe back into his pocket; the old woman looks up from the panda in its unreal bamboo thicket and frowns at them both.

"I'm very busy today, Frank. Call me next week. I think I can meet you at the Guggenheim next week."

And he walks quickly away towards the Roosevelt Rotunda, past the Siberian tiger and the Sumatran rhinoceros, leaving Frank alone with the frowning woman. When Sidney has vanished into the shadows behind a small herd of Indian elephants, Frank turns back to the leopards and the smudgy handprint Sidney McAvoy has left on their glass. There are the prints of six fingers.

Hours and hours later, past sunset to the other side of the wasted day, the night that seems even hotter than the scorching afternoon, and Frank is dreaming that the crack in the basement wall on St. Mark's Place is much too narrow for him to squeeze through. Maybe that's the way it really happened after all, and then he hears a small, anguished sound from somewhere close behind him, something hurting or lost, but when he turns to see, Frank opens his eyes, and there's only the tangerine glow of the noodle shop sign outside the apartment window. He blinks once, twice, but this stubborn world doesn't go away, doesn't break apart into random kaleidoscopic shards to become some other place entirely. So he sits up, head full of familiar disappointment, this incontestable solidity, and it takes him a moment to realize that Willa isn't in bed. Faint outline of her body left in the wrinkled sheets, and the bathroom light is burning, the door open, so she's probably just taking a piss.

"You okay in there?" he calls out, but no reply. The soft drip, drip, drip of the kitchenette faucet, tick of the wind-up alarm clock on the table next to Willa's side of the bed, street noise, but no answer. "Did you fall in or something?" he asks. "Did you drown?"

And still no response, but his senses are waking up, picking out more than the ordinary, every-night sounds, a trilling whine pitched so high he feels it more than hears it, and now he notices the way that the air in the apartment smells.

Go back to sleep, he thinks. *When you wake up again, it'll be over.* But both legs are already over the edge of the bed, both feet already on the dusty floor.

The trill is worming its way beneath his skin, soaking in, pricking gently at the hairs on his arms and the back of his neck. All the silver fillings in his teeth have begun to hum along sympathetically. Where he's standing, Frank can see into the bathroom, just barely, a narrow slice of linoleum, slice of porcelain toilet tank, a mildew and polyurethane fold of shower curtain. And he thinks that the air has started to shimmer, an almost imperceptible warping of the light escaping from the open door, but that might only be his imagination. He takes one small step towards the foot of the bed, and there's Willa, standing naked before the tiny mirror above the bathroom sink. The sharp jut of her shoulder blades and hip bones, the anorexic swell of her ribcage, all the minute details of her painful thinness seem even more pronounced in the harsh and curving light.

"Hey. Is something wrong? Are you sick" She turns her head slowly to look at him, or maybe only looking towards him because there's nothing much like recognition on her face. Her wide, unblinking eyes, blind woman's stare.

"Can't you hear me, Willa?" he asks as she turns slowly back to the mirror. Her lips move, shaping rough, inaudible words.

The trilling noise grows infinitesimally louder, climbs another half-octave. There's a warm, wet trickle across Frank's lips, and he realizes that his nose is bleeding.

Behind Willa the bathroom wall, the shower, the low ceiling – everything – ripples and dissolves, and there's a sudden, staccato *pop* as the bulb above the sink shatters. After an instant of perfect darkness, perfect nothing, there are dull and yellow-green shafts of light from somewhere far, far above, flickering light from an alien sun shining down through the waters of an alien sea. Dim, translucent shapes dart and flash through those depths, bodies more insubstantial than jellyfish, more sinuous than eels, and Willa rises to meet them, arms outstretched, her hair drifting about her face like a halo of seaweed and algae. In the ocean-filtered light, Willa's pale

skin seems sleek and smooth as dolphin flesh. Air rushes from her lips, her nostrils, and flows eagerly away in a glassy swirl of bubbles.

The trilling has filled Frank's head so full, and his aching skull, his brain, seem only an instant from merciful implosion, the fragile, eggshell bone collapsed by the terrible, lonely sound and the weight of all that water stacked above him. He staggers, takes a step backwards, and now Willa's face is turned up to meet the sunlight streaming down, and she's more beautiful than anyone or anything he's ever seen or dreamt.

Down on Mott Street, the screech of tires, the angry blat of a car horn, and someone begins shouting very loudly in Mandarin.

And now the bathroom is only a bathroom again, and Willa lies in a limp, strangling heap on the floor, her wet hair and skin glistening in the light from the unbroken bulb above the sink. The water rolls off her back, her thighs, spreading across the floor in a widening puddle, and Frank realizes that the trilling has finally stopped, only the memory of it left in his ringing ears and bleeding nose. When the dizziness has passed, he goes to her, sits down on the wet floor and holds her while she coughs and pukes up gouts of saltwater and snotty strands of something the color of verdigris. Her skin is so cold it hurts to touch, cold coming off her like an inverted fever, and something small and chitinous slips from her hair and scuttles away behind the toilet on long and jointed legs.

"Did you *see*?" she asks him, desperate, rheumy words gurgling out with all the water that she's swallowed. "Did you, Frank? Did you *see* it?"

"Yes," he tells her, just like every time before. "Yes, baby. I did. I saw it all." Willa smiles, closes her eyes, and in a little while she's asleep. He carries her, dripping, back to their bed and holds her until the sun rises, and she's warm again.

The next day neither of them goes to work, and some small, niggling part of Frank manages to worry about what will happen to them if he loses the shit job at Gotham Kwick Kopy, if Willa gets fired from the cafe, that obstinate shred of himself still capable of caring about such things. How the rent will be paid, how they'll eat, everything that hasn't really seemed to matter in more years than he wants to count. He spends half the morning in bed. His nosebleed keeps coming back, a roll of toilet paper and then one of their towels stained all the shades of dried and drying blood; Willa wearing her winter coat despite the heat, and she keeps trying to get him to go to a

doctor, but no, he says. That might lead to questions, and besides, it'll stop sooner or later. It's always stopped before.

By twelve o'clock, Willa's traded the coat for her pink cardigan and feels good enough that she makes them peanut butter and grape jelly sandwiches, black coffee and stale potato chips, and after he eats Frank begins to feel better, too. But going to the park is Willa's idea, because the apartment still smells faintly of silt and dead fish, muddy, low-tide stink that'll take hours more to disappear completely. He knows the odor makes her nervous, so he agrees, even though he'd rather spend the afternoon sleeping off his headache. Maybe have a cold shower, another cup of Willa's bitterstrong coffee, and if he's lucky he could doze for hours without dreaming.

They take the subway up to Fifth, follow the eastern edge of the park north, past the zoo and East Green all the way to Pilgrim Hill and the Conservatory Pond. It's not so very hot that there aren't a few model sailing ships on the pond, just enough breeze to keep their miniature Bermuda sails standing tall and taut as shark fins. Frank and Willa sit in the shade near the Alice in Wonderland statue, her favorite spot in all of Central Park, the rocky place near the tea party, granite and rustling leaves, the clean laughter of children climbing about on the huge bronze mushrooms. A little girl with frizzy black hair and red and white peppermint-striped tights is petting the kitten in Alice's lap, stroking its metal fur and meow-
ling loudly.

"I can't ever remember her name," Willa says.

"What?" Franks asks. "Whose name?" not sure if she means the little girl or the kitten or something else entirely.

"Alice's kitten. I know it had a name, but I never can remember it."

Frank watches the little girl for a moment. "Dinah," he says. "I think the kitten's name was Dinah."

"Oh, yeah, Dinah. That's it," and he knows that she's just thinking out loud, whatever comes to mind so that she won't have to talk about last night, so the conversation won't accidentally find its own way back to those few drowning moments of chartreuse light and eel shadows. She's trying so hard to pretend, and he almost decides they're both better off if he plays along and doesn't show her Dr. Solomon Monalisa's white calling card.

"That's a good name for a cat," she says. "If we ever get a kitten, I think I'll name it Dinah."

“Mrs. Wu doesn’t like cats.”

“Well, we’re not going to spend the rest of our lives in that dump. Next time, we’ll get an apartment that allows cats.”

Frank takes the card out and lays his wallet on the grass, but Willa hasn’t even noticed, too busy watching the children clambering about on Alice, too busy dreaming about kittens. The card is creased and smudged from a week riding around in his back pocket and all the handling it’s suffered, the edges beginning to fray, and he gives it to her without any explanation.

“What’s this?” she asks, and he tells her to read it first, just read it, so she does. She reads it two or three times, and then Willa returns the card and goes back to watching the children. But her expression has changed, the labored, make-believe smile gone, and now she just looks like herself again, plain old Willa, the distance in her eyes, the hard angles at the corners of her mouth that aren’t quite a frown.

“Sidney says he’s for real,” which is half the truth, at best, and Frank glances down at the card, reading it again for the hundredth or two-hundredth time.

“Sidney McAvoy’s a fucking lunatic.”

“He says this guy has maps – ”

“Christ, Frank. What do you want me to say? You want me to give you *permission* to go talk to some crackpot? You don’t need my permission.”

“I was hoping you’d come with me,” he replies so softly that he’s almost whispering, but he puts the card back into his wallet where neither of them will have to look at it, stuffs the wallet back into his jeans pocket.

“Well, I won’t. I go to your goddamn meetings. I already have to listen to that asshole Zaroba. That’s enough for me, thank you very much. That’s more than enough.”

The little girl petting Dinah slips, loses her footing and almost slides backwards off the edge of the sculpture. But her mother catches her and sets her safely on the ground.

“I see what it’s doing to you,” Frank says. “I have to watch. How much longer do you think you can go on like this?”

She doesn’t answer him, opens her purse and takes out a pack of cigarettes. There’s only one left, and she crumbles the empty package and tosses it over her shoulder into the bushes.

“What if this guy really can help you? What if he can make it *stop*?”

Willa’s digging noisily around in her purse, trying to find her lighter or a book of matches, and she turns and stares at Frank, the cigarette hanging unlit from her lips. Her eyes shining bright as broken gemstones, fractured crystal eyes, furious, resentful, and he knows then that she could hate him, that she could leave him here and never look back. She takes the cigarette from her mouth, licks her upper lip, and for a long moment Willa holds the tip of her tongue trapped tightly between her teeth.

“What the hell makes you think I *want* it to stop?”

And only silence as what she’s said sinks in, and he begins to understand that he’s never understood her at all.

“It’s killing you,” he says, finally, the only thing he can think to say, and Willa’s eyes seem to flash and grow brighter, more broken, more eager to slice.

“No, Frank, it’s the only thing keeping me *alive*. Knowing that it’s out there, that I’ll see it again, and someday maybe it won’t make me come back *here*.”

Then she gets up and walks quickly away towards the pond, taking brisk, determined steps to put more distance between them. She stops long enough to bum a light from an old black man with a dachshund, then ducks around the corner of the boathouse, and he can’t see her anymore. Frank doesn’t follow, sits watching the tiny sailboats and yachts gliding gracefully across the moss-dark surface of the water, their silent choreography of wakes and ripples. He decides maybe it’s better not to worry about Willa for now, plenty enough time for that later, and he wonders what he’ll say to Monalisa when finds him.

We shall be less apt to admire what this World calls great, shall nobly despise those Trifles the generality of Men set their Affections on, when we know that there are a multitude of such Earths inhabited and adorn’d as well as our own.

Christiaan Huygens (c. 1690)

Onion

It still frustrates me that *onion* looks so much like a palindrome, but isn't. This story got far more attention than I ever thought it would. An award, "best of" reprints, and, in the Summer of 2007, a producer wanted me to make of it a screenplay. I tried, but when he told me it was only the first half of the story, I lost interest. It is as whole as I can make it, and one good mystery is worth a thousand solutions.

Les Fleurs Empoisonnées

~ or ~

Dans le Jardin des Fleurs Toxiques

Miles past a town named Vidalia, town named after an onion, onion named after a town, but Dead Girl has no idea how many miles; the vast, unremarkable Georgia night like a seamless quilt of stars and kudzu vines, and all these roads look the same to her. The Bailiff behind the wheel of the rusty black Monte Carlo they picked up in Jacksonville after the Oldsmobile broke down, Bobby in the front seat beside him, playing with the dials on the radio; the endless chain of honky-tonk and gospel stations is broken only by the spit and crackle of static squeezed in between. Dead Girl's alone in the back seat, reading one of her books by moonlight. She asks Bobby to stop, please, because he's getting on her nerves, probably getting on the Bailiff's nerves, too. He pauses long enough to glance back at her, and his silver eyes flash like mercury and rainwater coins. He might be any six-year-old boy, except for those eyes.

"Let him be," the Bailiff says. "He isn't bothering me." Bobby smirks at her, sticks out his tongue, and goes back to playing with the radio.

"Suit yourself," Dead Girl says and turns a page, even though she hasn't finished reading the last one.

"Well, well, now," the Bailiff says, and he laughs his husky, drywheeze laugh. "*There's* a sight."

The Monte Carlo's brakes squeal, metal grinding metal, and the car drifts off the road. Dead Girl sits up, and she can see the hitchhiker in the headlights, a teenage girl holding up one hand to shield her eyes from the glare.

"I'm not hungry," Bobby says, as if someone had asked, and Dead Girl stares at the Bailiff's reflection in the rearview mirror. But there's no explanation waiting for her in his green eyes, his easy smile, the secretive parchment creases of his ancient face. She wishes for the hundredth time that she'd stayed in Providence with Gable, better things to do than riding around the sticks picking up runaways and bums. Having to sleep in the

trunks of rattletrap automobiles while the Bailiff runs his errands beneath the blazing Southern sun, sun so bright and violent that even the night seems scorched.

“Maybe this one ain’t for eating, boy,” the Bailiff chuckles, and the Monte Carlo rolls to a stop in a cloud of dust and grit and carbon monoxide. “Maybe this one’s something you’ve never seen before.”

The girl’s wearing dark wrap-around sunglasses, and her hair is as white as milk, milk spun into the finest silken thread, talcum-powder skin. “It’s just an albino,” Dead Girl mutters, disappointed. “You think we’ve never seen an albino before?”

The Bailiff laughs again and honks the horn. The girl leans forward and squints at them through her sunglasses and the settling dust, takes a hesitant step towards the car. She’s wearing a faded yellow Minnie Mouse T-shirt and carrying a tattered duffel bag.

“Pure as the driven snow,” the Bailiff says, “this one here. Funeral lilies and barbed wire. Keep your eyes open, both of you, or she just might teach you something you don’t *want* to learn.”

“Christ,” Dead Girl hisses and slumps back in her seat. “I thought we were in such a big, damn hurry. I thought Miss Aramat was – ”

“Watch your tongue, child,” the Bailiff growls back, and now his eyes flash angry emerald fire at her from the rearview mirror. “Mind your *place*,” and then Bobby’s rolling down his window, and the albino girl peers doubtfully into the Monte Carlo.

“Where you bound, sister?” the Bailiff asks, but she doesn’t answer right away, looks warily at Bobby and Dead Girl and then back at the road stretching away into the summer night.

“Savannah,” the albino girl says, finally. “I’m on my way to Savannah,” and Dead Girl can hear the misgiving, the guarded apprehension, weighting the edges of her voice.

“Well, now, how about that. Would you believe we’re headed that way ourselves? Don’t just sit there, Bobby. Open the door for the girl and help her with that bag – ”

“Maybe I should wait on the next car,” she says and wrinkles her nose like a rabbit. “There’s already three of you. There might not be enough room.”

“Nonsense,” the Bailiff replies. “There’s plenty of room, isn’t there, children?” Bobby opens his door and takes her duffel bag, stuffs it into the

floorboard behind his seat. The albino looks at the road one more time, and, for a moment, Dead Girl thinks maybe she's going to run, wonders if the Bailiff will chase her if she does, if it's *that* sort of lesson.

"Thanks," she says, sounding anything but grateful, and climbs into the back and sits beside Dead Girl. Bobby slams his door shut, and the Monte Carlo's smooth tires spin uselessly for a moment, flinging up sand and gravel, before they find traction and the car lurches forward onto the road.

"You from Vidalia?" the Bailiff asks, and the girl shakes her head, but doesn't say anything. Dead Girl closes her book – *Charlotte's Web i*n Latin, *Tela Charlottae* – and lays it on the seat between them. The albino smells like old sweat and dirty clothes, like fresh air and the warm blood in her veins. Bobby turns around in his seat and watches her with curious silver eyes.

"What's her name?" he asks Dead Girl, and the Bailiff swerves to miss something lying in the road.

"Dancy," the albino says. "Dancy Flammarion," and she takes off her sunglasses, revealing eyes the deep red-pink of pyrope or the pulpy hearts of fresh strawberries.

"Is she blind?" Bobby asks.

"How the hell would I know?" Dead Girl grumbles. "Ask her yourself."

"Are you blind?"

"No," Dancy tells him, the hard edge in her voice to say she knows this is a game, a taunting formality, and maybe she's seen it all before. "But the light hurts my eyes."

"Mine, too," Bobby says.

"Oculocutaneous albinism," the Bailiff chimes in. "A genetic defect in the body's ability to convert the amino acid tyrosine into melanin. Ah, but we're being rude, Bobby. She probably doesn't like to talk about it."

"No, that's all right. It doesn't bother me," Dancy says and leans suddenly, boldly, forward, leaving only inches between herself and Bobby. The movement surprises him, and he jumps. "What about *you*, Bobby? What's wrong with *your* eyes?" Dancy asks him.

"I – " he begins and then pauses and looks uncertainly at Dead Girl and the Bailiff. Dead Girl shrugs, no idea what the rules in this charade might be, and the Bailiff keeps his eyes on the road.

“That’s okay,” Dancy says, and she winks at him. “You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to, if you’re not supposed to tell. The angel tells me what I need to know.”

“*You* have an angel?” and now Bobby sounds skeptical.

“Everyone has an angel. Well, everyone I ever met so far. Even you, Bobby. Didn’t they tell you that?”

Dead Girl sighs and picks her book up again, opens it to a page she’s read twice already.

“Why don’t you see if you can find something on the radio,” she says to Bobby.

“But I’m still talking to Dancy.”

“You’ll have plenty of time to talk to Dancy, boy,” the Bailiff says. “She isn’t going anywhere.”

“She’s going to Savannah with us.”

“Except Savannah,” Dancy says very softly, faint smile at the corners of her mouth, and she turns away and looks out the window at the nightshrouded fields and farmhouses rushing silently past. Bobby stares at her for another minute or two, like he’s afraid she might disappear, then he goes back to playing with the radio knobs.

“You too, Mercy Brown,” the albino whispers, and Dead Girl stops reading.

“*What*?” she asks. “What did you just say to me?”

“I dreamed about you once, Mercy. I dreamed about you sleeping at the bottom of a cold river, crayfish tangled in your hair and this boy in your arms.” Dancy keeps her eyes on the window as she talks, her voice so cool, so unafraid, like maybe she climbs into cars with demons every goddamn night of the week.

“I dreamed about you and snow. You got an angel, too.”

“*You* shut the fuck up,” Dead Girl snarls. “That’s not my name, and I don’t care *who* you are, you shut up or – ”

“You’ll kill me anyway,” Dancy says calmly, “so what’s the difference?” Up front the Bailiff chuckles to himself. Bobby finds a station playing an old Johnny Cash song, “The Reverend Mr. Black,” and he sings along.

Southeast, and the land turns from open prairie and piney woods to salt marsh and estuaries, confluence of muddy, winding rivers, blackwater piss

of the distant Appalachians, the Piedmont hills, and everything between. The Lowcountry, *no fayrer or fytter place*, all cordgrass and wax myrtle, herons and alligators, and the old city laid out wide and flat where the Savannah River runs finally into the patient, hungry sea. The end of Sherman's March, and this swampy gem spared the Yankee torches, saved by gracious women and their soirée seductions, and in 1864 the whole city was made a grand Christmas gift to Abraham Lincoln.

The mansion on East Hall Street, Stephens Ward, built seventeen long years later, Reconstruction days, and Mr. Theodosius W. Ybanes hired a fashionable architect from Rhode Island to design his eclectic, mismatched palace of masonry and wrought iron, Gothic pilasters and high Italianate balconies. The mansard roof tacked on following a hurricane in 1888 and, after Theodosius' death, the house handed down to his children and grandchildren, great-grandchildren, generations come and gone and, unlike most of Savannah's stately, old homes, this house has never passed from the direct bloodline of its first master.

And, at last, delivered across the decades, a furious red century and decades more, into the small, slender hands of Miss Aramat Drawdes, great-great-great granddaughter of a Civil War munitions merchant and unspoken matriarch of the Stephens Ward Tea League and Society of Resurrectionists. The first female descendent of Old Ybanes not to take a husband, her sexual, social, and culinary proclivities entirely too unorthodox to permit even a marriage of convenience. But Miss Aramat keeps her own sort of family in the rambling mansion on East Hall Street. Behind yellow, glazed-brick walls, azaleas and ivy, windows blinded by heavy drapes, the house keeps its own counsel, its own world apart from the prosaic customs and concerns of the city.

And, from appearances, this particular night in June is nothing special, not like the time they found the transsexual junkie who'd hung herself with baling wire in Forsyth Park, or last October, when Candida had the idea of carving all their jack-o'-lanterns from human and ape skulls, and then setting them out on the porches in plain sight. Nothing so unusual or extravagant, only the traditional Saturday night indulgences: the nine ladies of the League and Society (nine now, but there have been more and less, at other times), assembled in the Yellow Room. Antique velvet wallpaper the pungent color of saffron, and they sit, or stand, or lie outstretched on the Turkish carpet, cushions strewn about the floor and a couple of threadbare

recamiers. Miss Aramat and her eight exquisite sisters, the nine who would be proper ghouls if only they'd been born to better skins than these fallible, ephemeral womanhusks. They paint their lips like open wounds, their eyes like bruises. Their fine dresses are not reproductions, every gown and corset and crinoline vintage Victorian or Edwardian, and never anything later than 1914, because that's the year the world ended, Miss Aramat says.

A lump of sticky black opium in the tall, eight-hosed hookah, and there are bottles of Burgundy, pear brandy, Chartreuse, and cognac, but tonight Miss Aramat prefers the bitter Spanish absinthe, and she watches lazily as Isolde balances a slotted silver trowel-like spoon on the rim of her glass. A single sugar cube, and the girl pours water from a carafe over the spoon, dissolving the sugar, drip, drip, drip, and the liqueur turns the milky green of polished jade.

"Me next," Emily demands from her seat on one of the yellow recamiers, but Isolde ignores her, pours herself an absinthe and sits on the floor at Miss Aramat's bare feet. She smirks at Emily, who rolls her blue, exasperated eyes and reaches for the brandy, instead.

"Better watch yourself, Isolde," Biancabella warns playfully from her place beneath a Tiffany floor lamp, stained-glass light like shattered sunflowers to spill across her face and shoulders. "One day we're gonna have *your* carcass on the table."

"In your dreams," Isolde snaps back, but she nestles in deeper between Miss Aramat's legs, anyway, takes refuge in the protective cocoon of her stockings and petticoat, the folds of her skirt.

Later, of course, there will be dinner, the mahogany sideboard in the dining room laid out with sweetbreads *des champignon*, boiled terrapin lightly flavored with nutmeg and sherry, yams and okra and red rice, raw oysters, Jerusalem artichokes, and a dozen desserts to choose from. Then Alma and Biancabella will play for them, cello and violin until it's time to go down to the basement and the evening's anatomizings.

Madeleine turns another card, the Queen of Cups, and Porcelina frowns, not exactly what she was hoping for, already growing bored with Maddy's dry prognostications; she looks over her left shoulder at Miss Aramat.

"I saw Samuel again this week," she says. "He told me the bottle has started to sing at night, if the moon's bright enough."

Miss Aramat stops running her fingers through Isolde's curly blonde hair and stares silently at Porcelina for a moment. Another sip of absinthe, sugar and anise on her tongue. "I thought we had an understanding," she says. "I thought I'd asked you not to mention him ever again, not in my presence, not in this house."

Porcelina glances back down at the tarot card, pushes her violet-tinted pince-nez farther up the bridge of her nose.

"He says that the Jamaicans are offering him a lot of money for it."

Across the room, Candida stops reading to Mary Rose, closes the copy of *Unaussprechlichen Kulten* and glares at Porcelina. "You may be the youngest," she says. "But that's no excuse for impudence. You were *told* – "

"But I've *seen* it, with my own eyes I've seen it," and now she doesn't sound so bold, not half so confident as only an instant before. Madeleine is trying to ignore the whole affair, gathers up her deck and shuffles the cards.

"You've seen what he wants you to see. What he *made* you see," Miss Aramat says. "Nothing more. The bottle's a fairy tale, and Samuel and the rest of those old conjurers know damn well that's all it will ever be."

"But what if it isn't? What if just one *half* the things he says are true?"

"Drop it," Candida mutters and opens her book again.

"Yes," Mary Rose says. "We're all sick to death of hearing about Samuel and that goddamn bottle."

But Miss Aramat keeps her bottomless hazel-green eyes on Porcelina, takes another small swallow of absinthe. She tangles her fingers in Isolde's hair and pulls her head back sharply, exposing the girl's pale throat to the room; they can all see the scars, the puckered worm-pink slashes between Isolde's pretty chin and her high lace collar.

"Then you go and call him, Porcelina," Miss Aramat says very softly. "Tell him to bring the bottle here, tonight. Tell him I want a demonstration."

Madeleine stops shuffling her cards, and Biancabella reaches for the brandy, even though her glass isn't empty.

"Before four o'clock, tell him, but after three. I don't want him or one of his little boys interrupting the formalities."

And when she's absolutely certain that Miss Aramat has finished, when Isolde has finally been allowed to lower her chin and hide the scars, Porcelina stands up and goes alone to the telephone in the hallway.

In the basement of the house on East Hall Street there are three marble embalming tables laid end to end beneath a row of fluorescent lights. The lights are one of Miss Aramat's few, grudging concessions to modernity, though for a time the Society worked only by candlelight, and then incandescent bulbs strung above the tables. But her eyes aren't what they used to be, and there was Biancabella's astigmatism to consider, as well. So Aramat bought the fluorescents in a government auction at Travis Field, and now every corner of the basement is bathed in stark white light, clinical light to illuminate the most secret recesses of their subjects.

Moldering redbrick walls, and here and there the sandy, earthen floor has been covered with sheets of varnished plywood, a makeshift, patchwork walkway so their boots don't get too muddy whenever it rains. An assortment of old cabinets and shelves lines the walls, bookshelves and glass-fronted display cases; at least a thousand stoppered apothecary bottles, specimen jars of various shapes and sizes filled with ethyl alcohol or formalin to preserve the ragged things and bits of things that float inside. Antique microscopes, magnifying lenses, and prosthetic limbs, a human skeleton dangling from a hook screwed into the roof of its yellowed skull, each bone carefully labeled with India ink in Miss Aramat's own spidery hand.

Alma's collection of aborted and pathologic fetuses occupies the entire northwest corner of the basement, and another corner has been given over to Mary Rose's obsession with the cranium of *Homo sapiens*. So far, she has fifty-three (including the dozen or so sacrificed for Candida's jack-o'-lanterns), classified as Negroid, Australoid, Mongoloid, and Xanthochroid, according T. H. Huxley's 1870 treatise on the races of man. Opposite the embalming tables is a long, low counter of carved and polished oak – half funereal shrine, half laboratory workbench – where Emily's framed photographs of deceased members of the League and Society, lovingly adorned with personal mementos and bouquets of dried flowers, vie for space with Madeleine's jumble of beakers, test tubes, and bell jars.

Nearer the stairs, there's a great black double-doored safe that none of them has ever tried to open, gold filigree and l. h. miller safe and ironworks, baltimore, md painted on one door just above the brass combination dial. Long ago, before Miss Aramat was born, someone stored a portrait of an elderly woman in a blue dress atop the safe, anonymous, unframed canvas propped against the wall, and the years and constant damp have taken their

toll. The painting has several large holes, the handiwork of insects and fungi, and the woman's features have been all but obliterated.

"I've never even *heard* of a Sithian," Isolde says, reaching behind her back to tie the strings of her apron.

"*Scy*thian, dear," Miss Aramat corrects her. "S-K-Y, like 'sky."

"Oh," Isolde says and yawns. "Well, I've never heard of *them*, either," and she watches as Biancabella makes the first cut, drawing her scalpel expertly between the small breasts of the woman lying on the middle table. Following the undertaker's original Y-incision, she slices cleanly through the sutures that hold the corpse's torso closed.

"An ancient people who probably originated in Anatolia and Northern Mesopotamia," Biancabella says as she carefully traces the line of stitches. "Their kingdom was conquered by the Iranian Suoromata, and by the early 6th Century BC they'd mostly become nomads wandering the Kuban, and later the Pontic Steppes – "

Isolde yawns again, louder than before, loud enough to interrupt Biancabella. "You sound like a teacher I had in high school. He always smelled like mentholated cough drops."

"They might have *been* Iranian," Madeleine says. "I know I read that somewhere."

Biancabella sighs and stops cutting the sutures, her blade lingering an inch or so above the dead woman's navel, and she glares up at Madeleine.

"They were *not* Iranian. Haven't you even bothered to read Plinius?" she asks and points the scalpel at Madeleine. "'*Ultra sunt Scytharum populi, Persae illos Sacas in universum applelavere a proxima gente, antiqui Arameos.*'"

"Where the hell is Arameos?" Madeleine asks, cocking one eyebrow suspiciously.

"Northern Mesopotamia."

"Who cares?" Isolde mumbles.

Biancabella shakes her head in disgust and goes back to work. "Obviously, some more than others," she says.

Miss Aramat reaches for the half-empty bottle of wine that Mary Rose has left on the table near the corpse's knees. She takes a long swallow of the Burgundy, wipes her mouth across the back of her hand, smearing her lipstick slightly. "According to Herodotus, the Scythians disemboweled their dead kings," she says and passes the bottle to Isolde. "Then they

stuffed the abdominal cavity with cypress, parsley seed, frankincense, and anise. Afterwards, the body was sewn shut again and entirely covered with wax."

Biancabella finishes with the sutures, lays aside her scalpel and uses both hands to force open the dead woman's belly. The sweet, caustic smells of embalming fluid and rot, already palpable in the stagnant basement air, seem to rise like steam from the interior of the corpse.

"Of course, we don't have the parsley *seed*," she says and glances across the table at Porcelina, "because someone's Greek isn't exactly what it ought to be."

"It's close enough," Porcelina says defensively, and she points an index finger at the bowl of fresh, chopped parsley lined up with all the other ingredients for the ritual. "I can't imagine that Miss Whomever She Might Be here's going to give a damn one way or another."

Biancabella begins inserting her steel dissection hooks through the stiffened flesh at the edges of the incision, each hook attached to a slender chain fastened securely to the rafters overhead. "Will someone please remind me again why we took this little quim in?"

"Well, she's a damn good fuck," Madeleine says. "At least when she's sober."

"And she makes a mean corn pudding," Alma adds.

"Oh, yes. The corn pudding. How could I have possibly forgotten the corn pudding."

"Next time," Porcelina growls, "you can fucking do it yourselves."

"No, dear," Miss Aramat says, her voice smooth as the tabletop, cold as the heart of the dead woman. "Next time, you'll do it right. Or there may not be another time after that."

Porcelina turns her back on them, then, turning because she's afraid they might see straight through her eyes to the hurt and doubt coiled about her soul. She stares instead at the louvered window above Mary Rose's skulls, the glass painted black, shiny, thick black latex to stop the day and snooping eyes.

"Well, you have to admit, at least then we'd never have to hear about that fucking bottle again," Candida laughs, and, as though her laughter were an incantation, skillful magic to shatter the moment, the back doorbell rings directly overhead. A buzz like angry, electric wasps filtered through the

floorboards. Miss Aramat looks at Porcelina, who hasn't taken her eyes off the window.

"You told him three o'clock?" Miss Aramat asks.

"I *told* him," Porcelina replies, sounding scared, and Miss Aramat nods her head once, takes off her apron, and returns it to a bracket on the wall.

"If I need you, I'll call," she says to Biancabella, and, taking what remains of the Burgundy, goes upstairs to answer the door.

"Maybe Bobby and me should stay with the car," Dead Girl says again, in case the Bailiff didn't hear her the first time. Big, blustery man fiddling with his keys, searching for the one that fits the padlock on the iron gate. He stops long enough to glance back at her and shake his head *no*. The moonlight glints dull off his bald scalp, and he scratches at his beard and glares at the uncooperative keys.

"But I saw a cop back there," Dead Girl says. "What if he finds the car and runs the plates? What if – "

"We can always get another car," the Bailiff grumbles. "Better he finds a stolen car than a stolen car with the two of you sitting inside."

"And I wanna see the ladies," Bobby chirps, swinging the Bailiff's leather satchel, and Dead Girl wishes she could smack him, would if the Bailiff weren't standing right there to see her do it.

Bobby leans close to the albino girl and stands on tiptoes, his lips pressed somewhere below her left ear. There's a piece of duct tape across her mouth, silver duct tape wrapped tight around her wrists, and Dead Girl's holding onto the collar of her Minnie Mouse T-shirt.

"They're like *ghouls*," he whispers, "only nicer."

"No, they're not," Dead Girl snorts. "Not real ghouls. Real ghouls don't live in great big fucking houses."

"You'll see," Bobby whispers to Dancy. "They dig up dead people and cut them into pieces. That's what ghouls do."

And the Bailiff finds the right key, then – "*There* you are, my rusty little sparrow" – and the hasp pops open and in a moment they're through the gate and standing in the garden. Dead Girl looks longingly back at the alleyway and the Monte Carlo as the Bailiff pulls the gate shut behind him, *clang*, and snaps the padlock closed again.

The garden is darker than the alley, the low, sprawling limbs of live oaks and magnolias to hide the moon, crooked limbs draped with Spanish

moss and epiphytic ferns. Dancy has to squint to see. She draws a deep breath through her nostrils, taking in the sticky, flower-scented night, camellias and boxwood, the fleshy white magnolia blossoms. Behind her, the Bailiff's keys jangle, and Dead Girl shoves Dancy roughly forward, towards the house.

The Bailiff leads the way down the narrow cobblestone path that winds between the trees, past a brass sundial and marble statues set on marble pedestals, nude bodies wrapped in shadow garments, unseeing stone eyes staring after Heaven. Dancy counts her steps, listens to the Bailiff's fat-man wheeze, the twin silences where Dead Girl and Bobby's breath should be. Only the slightest warm breeze to disturb the leaves, the drone of crickets and katydids, and, somewhere nearby, a whippoorwill calling out to other whippoorwills.

A thick hedge of oleander bushes, and then the path turns abruptly and they're standing at the edge of a reflecting pool choked with hyacinth and water lilies; broad flagstones to ring its dark circumference, and the Bailiff pauses here, stares down at the water and rubs his beard. There's an expression on his face like someone who's lost something, someone who knows he'll never find it again, or it'll never find him.

"What is it?" Dead Girl asks. "What's wrong?" But the Bailiff only shrugs his broad shoulders, and takes another step nearer the pool, standing right at the very edge now.

"One day," he says. "One day, when you're older, maybe, I'll tell you about this place. One day, maybe, I'll even tell you what she keeps trapped down there at the bottom with the goldfish and the tadpoles."

He laughs, an ugly, bitter sound, and Dancy makes herself turn away from the pool. She can hear the drowned things muttering to themselves below the surface, even if Dead Girl can't, the rheumy voices twined with roots and slime. She looks up at the house, instead, and sees they've almost reached the steps leading to the high back porch. Some of the downstairs windows glow with soft yellow light, light that can't help but seem inviting after so much darkness. But Dancy knows better, knows a lie when she sees one. There's nothing to comfort or save her behind those walls. She takes another deep breath and starts walking towards the steps before Dead Girl decides to shove her again.

"You still got that satchel?" the Bailiff asks, and "Yes sir," the boy with silver eyes answers and holds it up so he can see. "It's getting heavy."

“Well, you just hang in there, boy. It’s going to be getting a whole lot lighter any minute now.”

They climb the stairs together, Dancy in the lead, still counting the paces, the Bailiff at the rear, and the wooden steps creak loudly beneath their feet. At the top, the Bailiff presses the doorbell, and Dead Girl pushes Dancy into an old wicker chair.

“Where’s your angel now?” she sneers and digs her sharp nails into the back of Dancy’s neck and forces her head down between her knees.

“Be careful, child,” the Bailiff says. “Don’t start asking questions you don’t really want answered.” He’s staring back towards the alley, across the wide, wide garden towards the car. “She might show you an angel or two, before this night’s done.”

And Dead Girl opens her mouth to tell him to fuck off and never mind her “place” because babysitting deranged albino girls was never part of the deal. But the back door opens then, light spilling from the house, and Dead Girl and Bobby both cover their eyes and look away. Dancy raises her head, wishing they hadn’t taken her sunglasses, and she strains to see more than the silhouette of the woman standing in the doorway.

“Well, isn’t this a surprise,” the woman says cheerily, and then she leads them all inside.

Through the bright kitchen and down a long, dimly-lit hall, walls hung with gilt-framed paintings of scenes that might have found their way out of Dancy’s own nightmares: midnight cemetery pictures, opened graves and broken headstones, a riot of hunched and prancing figures, dog-jawed, fire-eyed creatures, dragging corpses from the desecrated earth.

“We can have our tea in the Crimson Room,” the woman named Miss Aramat says to the Bailiff. Small woman barely as tall as Dancy, china-doll hands and face, china-doll clothes, and Dancy thinks she might shatter if she fell, if anyone ever struck her. The jewels about her throat sparkle like drops of blood and morning dew set in silver, and she’s wearing a big black hat, broad-brimmed and tied with bunches of lace and ribbon, two iridescent peacock feathers stuck in the band. Her waist cinched so small that Dancy imagines one hand would reach almost all the way around it, thumb to middle finger. She isn’t old, though Dancy wouldn’t exactly call her a young woman, either.

Miss Aramat opens a door and ushers them into a room the color of a slaughterhouse: red walls, red floors, crossed swords above a red-tiled fireplace, a stuffed black bear wearing a red fez standing guard in one corner. She tugs on a braided bell pull and somewhere deep inside the house there's the muffled sound of chimes.

"I didn't expect you until tomorrow night," she says to the Bailiff and motions for him to take a seat in an armchair upholstered with cranberry brocade.

"Jacksonville took less time than I'd expected," he replies, shifting his weight about, trying to find a comfortable way to sit in an uncomfortable chair. "You seemed anxious to get this shipment. I trust we're not intruding."

"Oh, no, no," Miss Aramat assures him. "Of course not," and she smiles a smile that makes Dancy think of an alligator.

"Well, this time I have almost everything you asked for," and then the armchair cracks loudly, and he stops fidgeting and sits still, glancing apologetically at Miss Aramat. "Except the book. I'm afraid my man on Magazine Street didn't come through on that count."

"Ah. I'm sorry to hear that. Biancabella will be disappointed."

"However," the Bailiff says quickly and jabs a pudgy thumb towards Dancy, who's sitting now between Dead Girl and Bobby on a long red sofa. "I think perhaps I have something here that's going to more than make up for it."

Miss Aramat pretends she hasn't already noticed Dancy, that she hasn't been staring at her for the last five minutes. "That's marvelous," she says, though Dancy catches the doubtful edge in her voice, the hesitation. "I don't think we've ever had an albino before."

"Oh, she's not just any albino," the Bailiff says, then grins and scratches his beard. "You must have heard about the unpleasantness in Waycross last month. Well, *this* is the girl who did the killing."

Something passes swiftly across Miss Aramat's face, then, a fleeting wash of fear or indignation, and she takes a step back towards the doorway.

"My god, man. And you brought her *here*?"

"Don't worry. I think she's actually quite harmless."

The Bailiff winks at Dead Girl, and she slams an elbow into Dancy's ribs to prove his point. Her breath rushes out through her nostrils and she doubles over, gasping uselessly against the duct tape still covering her

mouth. A sickening swirl of black and purple fireflies dances before her eyes.

I'm going to throw up, she thinks. *I'm going to throw up, and choke to death.*

"You ask me, someone must be getting sloppy down there in Waycross," the Bailiff says, "if this skinny little bitch could do that much damage. Anyway, when we found her, I thought to myself, now who would appreciate such an extraordinary morsel as this, such a tender pink delicacy."

Miss Aramat is chewing indecisively at a thumbnail, and she tugs the bell pull again, harder this time, impatient, stomps the floor twice.

"No extra charge?" she asks.

"Not a penny. You'll be doing us all a favor."

Dancy shuts her eyes tight, breathing through her nose, tasting blood and bile at the back of her mouth. The Bailiff and Miss Aramat are still talking, but their voices seem far away now, inconsequential. This is the house where she's going to die, and she doesn't understand why the angel never told her that. The night in Waycross when she drove her knife into the heart of a monster dressed in the skins of dead men and animals, or before that, the one she killed in Bainbridge. Each time the angel there to tell her it was right, the world a cleaner place for her work, but never a word about this house and the woman in the wide peacock hat. Slowly, the dizziness and nausea begin the pass even if the pain doesn't, and she opens her eyes again and stares at the antique rug between her tennis shoes.

"I said *look* at me," and it takes Dancy a moment to realize that the woman's talking to her. She turns her head, and now Miss Aramat's standing much closer than before and there are two younger women standing on either side of her.

"*She* killed the Gynander?" the very tall woman on Miss Aramat's right asks skeptically. "Jesus," and she wipes her hands on the black rubber apron she's wearing, adjusts her spectacles for a better view.

The auburn-haired woman on Miss Aramat's left shakes her head, disbelieving or simply amazed. "What do you think she'd taste like, Biancabella? I have a Brazilian recipe for veal I've never tried."

"Oh, no. We're not wasting this one in the stew pot."

"I'll have to get plantains, of course. And lots of fresh lime."

“Aramat, tell her this one’s for the slab. Anyway, she looks awfully stringy.”

“Yes, but I can marinate – ”

“Just bring the tea, Alma,” Miss Aramat says, interrupting the auburn-haired woman. “And sweets for the boy. I think there are still some blueberry tarts left from breakfast. You may call Isolde up to help you.”

“But you’re not really going to let Biancabella have *all* of her, are you?”

“We’ll talk about it later. Get the tea. The jasmine, please.”

And Alma sulks away towards the kitchen, mumbling to herself; Biancabella watches her go. “It’s a wonder that one’s not fat as a pig,” she says.

Miss Aramat kneels in front of Dancy, brushes cornsilk bangs from her white-rabbit eyes, and when Dancy tries to pull back, Dead Girl grabs a handful of her hair and holds her still.

“Does she bite?” Miss Aramat asks Dead Girl, pointing at the duct tape, and Dead Girl shrugs.

“She hasn’t bitten me. I just got tired of listening to her talk about her goddamn angel.”

“Angel?”

“She has an angel,” Bobby says. “She says everyone has an angel, even me. Even Dead Girl.”

“Does she really?” Miss Aramat asks the boy, most of her apprehension gone and something like delight creeping into her voice to fill the void.

“Her angel tells her where to find monsters, and how to kill them.”

“Angels and monsters,” Miss Aramat whispers, and she smiles, her fingertips gently stroking Dancy’s cheeks, skin so pale it’s almost translucent. “You must be a regular Joan of Arc, then, *la pucelle de Dieu* to send us all scuttling back to Hell.”

“She’s a regular *nut*,” Dead Girl says and draws circles in the air around her right ear.

The Bailiff laughs, and the armchair cracks again.

“Is that true, child? Are you insane?” and Miss Aramat pulls the duct tape slowly off Dancy’s mouth, drops it to the carpet. It leaves behind an angry red swatch of flesh, perfect rectangle to frame her lips, and Miss Aramat leans forward and kisses her softly. Dancy stiffens, but Dead Girl’s

hand is there to keep her from pulling away. Only a moment, and when their mouths part, there's a faint smear of rouge left behind on Dancy's lips.

"Strange," Miss Aramat says, touching the tip of her tongue to her front teeth. "She tastes like hemlock."

"She *smells* like shit," Dead Girl sneers and yanks hard on Dancy's hair.

Miss Aramat ignores Dead Girl, doesn't take her eyes off Dancy's face.

"Do you know, child, what it meant a hundred years ago, when a man sent a woman a bouquet of hemlock? It meant, 'You will be my death.' But no, you didn't know that, did you?"

Dancy closes her eyes, remembering all the times that have been so much worse than this, all the horror and shame and sorrow to give her strength. The burning parts of her no one and nothing can ever touch, the fire where her soul used to be.

"Look at me when I talk to you," Miss Aramat says, and Dancy does, opening her eyes wide and spits in the woman's china-doll face.

"*Whore*," Dancy screams, and, "*Witch*," before Dead Girl clamps a hand over her mouth.

"Guess you should've left the tape on after all," she snickers. Miss Aramat takes a deep breath, fishes a lace handkerchief from the cuff of one sleeve and wipes away the spittle clinging to her face. She stares silently at the damp linen for a moment while Dead Girl laughs and the Bailiff mumbles half-hearted apologies behind her.

"A needle and thread will do a better job, I think," Miss Aramat says calmly and gets up off her knees. She passes the handkerchief to Biancabella and then makes a show of smoothing the wrinkles from her dress.

Then Alma comes back with a silver serving tray, cups and saucers, cream and sugar, a teapot trimmed in gold and there are violets painted on the side. Porcelina's a step behind her, carrying another, smaller silver tray piled with cakes and tarts and a bowl of chocolate bon-bons.

"We were out of jasmine," Alma says. "So I used the rose hip and chamomile, instead."

"What's she doing up here?" Miss Aramat points at Porcelina. "I told you to call for Isolde."

Alma frowns, sets the tray down on a walnut table near the Bailiff. “I did,” she says. “But Porcelina came.”

“Isolde was busy draining the corpse,” Porcelina explains, and she puts her tray down beside the other. “And I’ve never seen vampires before.”

“Is it everything you always hoped it would be?” Dead Girl purls sarcastically.

“Rose hip and chamomile sounds just wonderful,” the Bailiff says, taking a saucer and two sugar cubes. “And are those poppy-seed cakes?”

Miss Aramat stares at Porcelina, who pretends not to notice, while Alma pours steaming tea into the cups.

“Yes, they are,” Porcelina says. “Mary Rose baked them just this morning.”

“Delightful. I haven’t had a good poppy-seed cake in ages.”

“Can I please have two of these?” Bobby asks, poking the sticky indigo filling of a blueberry tart lightly dusted with confectioner’s sugar.

“I don’t see why not, dear. They’ll only go to waste, otherwise.”

And then the sudden, swelling howl from Miss Aramat, rabid sound much too big, too wild, to ever have fit inside her body, her narrow throat, but it spills out, anyway. She turns and rushes towards the red fireplace, stretching up on tiptoes to snatch one of the swords from its bracket above the mantel. Broadsword almost as long as she is tall, but such grace in her movement, the silver arc of tempered steel, that it might weigh no more than a broomstick.

Alma shrieks and drops the violet-dappled teapot and the cup she was filling. They seem to fall forever as the sword swings round like the needle of some deadly compass, finally smashing wetly against the floor in the same instant that the blade comes to rest beneath Porcelina’s chin. The razor point pressed to the soft place beneath her jawbone, only a little more pressure and she’d bleed; a thrust and the blade would slide smoothly through windpipe cartilage and into her spine.

The Bailiff stops chewing, his mouth stuffed with poppy-seed cake, the sword only inches from the end of his nose. He reaches slowly for the automatic pistol tucked into the waistband of his trousers, and Bobby turns and runs back to Dead Girl.

There’s grin on Miss Aramat’s face like rictus, wide and toothy corpse grin. “Biancabella,” she says, but already the fury has drained out of her, leaving her voice barely a hoarse murmur. “Remember last winter, when

you wanted to do *Salomé*? Maybe our guests would enjoy the entertainment."

"She'll make a poor Jokanaan," Biancabella says, her eyes on the Bailiff's hand as he flips off the gun's safety and aims the barrel at Miss Aramat's head.

"Oh, *I* think she'll do just fine," Aramat says, and now the point of the sword draws a single scarlet bead from Porcelina's throat.

"*Please*. I'm sorry. I only wanted to see – "

"'She is monstrous, thy daughter, she is altogether monstrous. In truth, what she has done is a *great* crime.'"

The Bailiff swallows and licks his lips, catching the last stray crumbs. "You're very thoughtful, Aramat," he says coolly, politely, as if declining another cake or another cup of jasmine tea. "Some other time, perhaps."

"'I will not *look* at things, I will not suffer things to look at *me*.'"

"For fuck's sake," Biancabella hisses. "You know that he means it."

Aramat glances sidewise at the Bailiff and his gun, and then quickly back to Porcelina. Her grin slackens to a wistful, sour sort of smile, and she lowers the blade until the point is resting on the tea-stained carpet.

"I didn't want you thinking I wasn't a good host," she says, her eyes still fixed on Porcelina. The girl hasn't moved, stands trembling like a palsied statue, a thin trickle of blood winding its way towards the high collar of her dress.

"You understand that, Bailiff. I couldn't have you going back up to Providence and Boston, telling them all I wasn't a good host."

The Bailiff breathes out stale air and relief, and slowly he lowers his gun, easing his thumb off the trigger.

"Now, you know I'd never say a thing like that, Miss Aramat." He puts the gun away and reaches for one of the cups of tea. "I *always* look forward to our visits."

"I really wasn't expecting you until tomorrow night," she says, and Biancabella takes the sword from her hands, returns it to its place above the mantel. Miss Aramat thanks her and sits down in a salon chair near the Bailiff, but she doesn't take her eyes off Porcelina until Alma has led her from the room.

On the red sofa, Dancy turns her head and looks at Dead Girl and the frightened boy in her arms. Empty silver eyes in ageless, unaging faces. Eyes that might have seen hundreds of years or only decades, and it really

makes no difference, one way or the other, when a single moment can poison a soul forever.

"Can I please have something to drink," she asks, and Dead Girl whispers in Bobby's ear. He nods his head, takes his arms from around her neck, and sits silently on the sofa next to Dancy while Dead Girl goes to get Dancy a cup of tea.

Sometime later, though Dancy can't be sure how much later, as there are no clocks in the red room, but a whole hour, surely, since they left her alone on the sofa. The contents of the leather satchel traded for a fat roll of bills, and the Bailiff turned and winked at her before he left. Miss Aramat and Biancabella followed him and Dead Girl and Bobby back out into the hall, shutting and locking the door behind them. There's only one small window, set high up on the wall past the fireplace, but if her hands weren't still strapped together with duct tape, maybe she could reach it, if she stood on one of the chairs or tables.

"They'd only catch you," the black bear in the corner says. "They'd catch you and bring you right back again." She isn't very surprised that the bear's started talking to her in his gruff, sawdusty, stuffed-bear voice.

"They might not," she says. "I can run fast."

"They can run faster," the bear says, unhelpfully.

Dancy stares at the bear, at the ridiculous hat perched between his ears. She asks him if he can talk to anyone or just to her, because sometimes there are things that can only talk to her, things only she can hear because no one else will ever listen.

"I talked to the man who shot me," the bear growls. "And I spoke to Candida once, but she told me she'd throw me out with the trash if I ever did it again."

"What will they do to me?" Dancy asks, and when the bear doesn't answer her, she asks again. "What are they going to do to me, bear?"

"I'd rather not say."

"Stupid bear. You probably don't have any idea what goes on in this house."

The bear grumbles to itself and stares straight ahead with its glass eyeballs. "I *wish* I didn't," he says. "I wish the taxidermist had forgotten to give me eyes to see or ears to hear. I wish the hunter had left me to rot in the woods."

“They’re very wicked women,” Dancy says, watching the door now, instead of the bear. He doesn’t reply, tired of listening to her or maybe he’s gone back to sleep, whatever it is dead bears do instead of sleep. She gets up and crosses the room, stands in front of two paintings hung side by side above a potted plant. Both are portraits of the bodies of dead women.

“Is this a riddle?” she asks the bear.

“I don’t answer riddles,” the bear replies.

“That’s not what I asked you.”

“If I still had a stomach,” the bear says, “I’d like one of those chocolate bon-bons there,” and then he doesn’t point at the silver serving platter because he can’t move, and Dancy decides she’s better off ignoring him and looks at the two paintings, instead.

The one on the right shows a naked corpse so emaciated that Dancy can make out the sharp jut of its hip bones, the peaks and valleys of its ribs. Sunken, hollow eyes, gaping mouth, and the woman’s left breast has sagged so far that it’s settled in her armpit. She lies on a bare slab, and there’s only a hard wooden block to prop up her skull.

“You could put one into my mouth,” the bear suggests. “I might remember how to taste it.”

“Shut up, bear,” and now Dancy examines the painting on her left. This dead woman might only be sleeping, if not for the grief on the face of the old man seated there at her side. Her hands folded neatly across her breasts, and she’s dressed in a satin gown and lies on a bed covered with white roses, two soft pillows tucked beneath her head.

“It *is* a riddle,” Dancy says. “One is the truth, and one isn’t. Or they’re both true, but only partly true. They’re both lies, without the other.”

“Give me a bon-bon, and I’ll tell you which,” the stuffed bear growls.

“You don’t answer riddles. You said so.”

“I’ll make an exception.”

“I don’t think you even know.”

“I’m dead. Dead bears know lots of things,” and Dancy’s thinking about that, trying to decide whether or not she could even get a piece of the candy all the way up into the bear’s mouth with her wrists tied together.

“All right,” she says, but then there’s a rustling sound behind her, like dry October leaves in a cold breeze, and the air smells suddenly of cinnamon and ice.

I never knew ice had a smell, she thinks, turning, and there's a very pretty boy standing on the other side of the room, watching her. The door's still closed, or he shut it again. He's tall and very slender, maybe a little older than she is, and wearing a black velvet dress with a dark green symbol like an hourglass embroidered over his flat chest. His long hair is the exact same green as the hourglass, and his eyes are the color of starlight.

"Hello, Dancy," he says, and takes a step towards her. He's barefoot and has a silver ring on each of his toes. "Who were you talking to?"

"The bear," she says, and the boy smiles and reaches into a pocket of his dress. He takes out a small stoppered bottle and holds it up where she can see. The glass is the amber color of pine sap or deep swamp pools stained by rotting vegetation.

"The Ladies have asked me to speak to you," he tells her. "I've brought them something quite precious, but they thought you should see it first. And, I admit, I've been wanting to see you for myself. You have a lot of people talking, Dancy Flammarion."

"Did you know he was coming?" she asks the bear, or her angel, it doesn't really matter which, since neither of them answers her.

"You're not exactly what any of us expected. Why did you come to Savannah? Who did you come here to kill?"

"I'm not sure," she says, and that much is true, all her dreams after Waycross, all the things she sees in dark hours, only bits and tattered pieces, something broken and there wasn't time to figure out how all the parts fit together.

"You didn't come for the Ladies?"

"They're not real monsters," she says. "They're nothing but witches and perverts and cannibals. Sure, they're all crazy. But they're not real monsters at all."

"No," he says. "They're not. Did you come for me, then? Did you come for my master, or one of the Parsifal?"

"I don't know."

"Did you come for this?" and the boy in the black dress holds the bottle out to her, and Dancy looks back at the bear again, imagines a story where he springs suddenly to life and leaps across the room to devour this strange boy in a single bite.

"No. I don't even know what that is," she says.

For a moment, the boy doesn’t say anything else, watches her with his brilliant starshine eyes, eyes to read her mind, her soul, to ferret out lies and half truths. They’re starting to make her feel light-headed, those eyes, and she glances down at the floor.

“Do I frighten you, Dancy?”

“No,” she lies. “I’m not scared of you.”

“Look at me then,” he says, and when she does, Dancy sees that she isn’t standing by the bear and the dead-woman paintings anymore, but sitting on the red sofa again, and the duct tape binding her hands is gone. The pretty boy is sitting beside her, on her left, staring down at the amber bottle in his hand. The glass looks very old, oily, prismatic. He shakes it, and inside something buzzes and flickers to life, lightning-bug flicker. Soon the bottle has begun to glow as brightly as the fancy lamps set around the room, and she can’t look directly at it anymore.

“Some people still think that it’s the Grail,” he says. “It isn’t, of course. The alchemist Petrus Bonus thought it might be a splinter of the *lapis exilis*, but it isn’t that, either. For a long time, it was lost. It turned up a few years ago in a Portuguese fisherman’s nets, trapped inside this bottle. The fisherman died trying to open it.”

“So what is it?” Dancy asks, trying not to hear the low, thrumming voices woven into the light from the bottle. A rumbling thunderstorm choir to rattle her teeth, to make ashes of her bones and soot of her white flesh.

“Just a toy. An unfinished experiment. Some forgotten, second-rate wizard’s silly trinket.”

“Then it isn’t precious at all,” Dancy says, and her eyes have started to hurt so badly that she looks away. Tears are streaming down her cheeks, and the thrumming sound is starting to make her head ache.

“It’s quite useless, but there are people who would die for it. There are people who would *kill* for it.”

“You’re just another riddle, aren’t you?” Dancy whispers. “I’m sick of riddles.” She’s holding her fingertips to her temples, eyes squeezed shut, the bottle voices stuck inside her head now and trying to force their way out through her skull.

“But that’s all there is, I’m afraid. In the whole, wide, irredeemable world, that’s all there is, finally.”

“No. That’s not true,” Dancy says. “There’s pain.”

“But why? *Why* is there pain, Dancy?”

“So there can be an end to pain,” and she wishes on the names of all the saints and angels she can remember that the boy will stop talking, stop asking her questions, kill her and get it over with. She doesn’t want to be alive when the voices from the bottle find their way out of her head.

“What do you hear, Dancy Flammarion? The voices, what does they sing for you? What songs do they sing for martyrs and monster slayers?”

“The *hate* you,” she says and then bites down hard on the end of her tongue so that she won’t say anything else, nothing else she isn’t supposed to say. Her mouth tastes like salt and wheat pennies and rain water.

“That’s nothing I didn’t already know. What do they sing for my oblation, for your sacrifice?”

The throb behind her eyes folding and unfolding, becoming something unbearable, unthinkable, that stretches itself across the sizzling sky, running on forever or so far it may as well be forever. A choir of agony, razorshard crescendo.

“Haven’t you ever tried to open the bottle?” Dancy asks the boy, because she can’t keep it all inside herself any longer.

And for her answer, the rustling, autumn sound again, though this time she thinks it’s actually more like wings, leathery bat wings or the nervous wings of small birds, the flutter of ten thousand flapping wings. Dancy knows that if she opens her eyes it won’t be the boy sitting next to her. Something else entirely, something much closer to whatever he really is, and now the red room stinks of roadkill and shit and garbage left to slowly rot beneath the summer sun.

“It’s only a toy,” she says.

“That’s what he’s afraid of,” the stuffed bear growls from across the room, and Dancy laughs, because she knows he’s telling the truth. Dead bears don’t like riddles, either, and when she tries to stand up she falls, tumbles like a dropped teapot that would never stop falling if she had a choice, would never have to shatter like the china-doll woman who shattered a long, long time ago and the Savannah River washed most of the pieces away to the sea.

Dancy opens her eyes, and the bottle’s lying on the floor in front of her. The roaring, hurtful voices inside drip from her nostrils and lips and ears, a sticky molasses-dark puddle on the rug.

“Pick it up,” the thing that isn’t a boy in a dress snarls, making words from the tumult of feathers and hurricane wind. “You’re dying, anyway.

There’s nothing it can do to you. Show me the trick.”

“There *isn’t* any trick,” she says, reaching for the bottle. “It’s only a toy.”

“No,” the bear growls. “Don’t you touch it. Make him do his own dirty work.”

But she’s already holding the bottle, so light in her hand, so warm, a balm to soothe the pain eating her alive, and she looks up into the maelstrom spinning in the bruised place hung a few feet above the red sofa. The counterclockwise gyre of snapping, twig-thin bones and mockingbird quills, the eyes like swollen, seeping wounds. And *here*, this part she remembers, this moment from a nightmare of hungry, whirling fire and dying birds.

“You should have tried the window,” the bear says, and Dancy vomits, nothing much in her stomach but the tea that Dead Girl let her drink, but she vomits, anyway.

“It *knows* you, Dancy Flammarion. Before you were born, it knew you. Before the sun sparked to life, it was *already* calling you here.”

“I don’t want it,” she coughs and wipes her mouth.

“*You* know *the trick. We* know *you know the trick,*” and the thing in the air above the sofa is screaming, screeching, turning faster and faster, and bits of itself are coming lose and drifting slowly down to the floor. Wherever they land, the rug scorches and smolders.

“*Open it!*”

Dancy sits up, and for a moment she stares deep into the wheel, the paradox still point at its absolute center – consuming and blossoming heart, nothing and everything there all at once. “Abracadabra,” she whispers, her throat gone raw and her head coming apart at the seams, and she throws the bottle as hard as she can. It arcs end over end, and the pretty boy with starshine eyes (and she sees that he *has* become a boy again, that the boy was there somewhere, all along) is scrambling after it. When the bottle hits the wall, it bursts into a spray of powdered glass and blue-golden flame that rises quickly towards the ceiling. A sparkling ruin that twines itself into a hammer, a wave, a fist of the purest light, and as the pain leaves her head and the world slips kindly away to leave her alone in darkness, the hammer falls, and the only sounds left are the promises that monsters make before they die.

“Is it over?” Mary Rose asks, speaking very quietly, and Biancabella holds an index finger up to her lips, hush.

The Ladies of the Stephens Ward Tea League and Society of Resurrectionists wait together in the long hall outside the door to the Crimson Room. Miss Aramat is sitting on the stairs, alone with Porcelina’s body in her arms, singing softly to herself or to Porcelina’s ghost – *Blacks and bays, dapples and greys, when you wake you shall have all the pretty little horses.* The bread knife she used to cut Porcelina’s throat lies at her feet, sticky with drying blood. The house on East Hall Street is quiet now, breathless in the battered silence after the storm, and there’s only Miss Aramat’s voice and the obstinate ticking of the grandfather clock by the stairs, the distant ticking of other clocks in other rooms.

All the things they’ve heard, or only think they’ve heard, since the Bailiff and his charges left and Samuel’s boy went into the room with his bottle and the albino girl, the inescapable, inevitable moment of Porcelina’s death, but all of it not half so terrible as this silence. This waiting, and once Candida put her hand on the doorknob and pulled it quickly back again, her palm scalded raw by the cold.

“He used us,” Isolde murmurs. “He *lied* to us.”

“They *both* used us,” Emily replies, then the look from Miss Aramat enough that neither of them says anything more.

Just the clocks and pretty little horses and the long, last hour before dawn.

Then the knob turns, finally, the tumblers of the lock rolling themselves, the irrelevant key in Biancabella’s pocket, and the door swings open. Dancy Flammarion stands silhouetted in lamplight and a weirder, flaxen glow, fairy fire, foxfire, that seems to shine from somewhere just behind her. There’s power in that light, and dignity, and darker things that will haunt the dreams of the Ladies for the rest of their lives. But the glow fades immediately away when she steps out into the shadow-strewn hallway, and she’s only the Bailiff’s hitchhiker again.

Dancy holds one of the swords from over the fireplace gripped tightly in both hands. Her face is streaked with tears and blood and vomit, and Biancabella notices that one of her shoes is untied.

Miss Aramat stops singing. “What did you do to him?” she asks. “Is he dead? Did you kill him?”

“He would have let you open the bottle for him,” Dancy says. “He would have let you all die trying.”

Miss Aramat looks down at Porcelina’s head in her lap, and she smiles sadly and strokes the murdered girl’s matted hair.

“What was in it?” she whispers.

“Nothing meant for you. Nothing meant for him, either.”

“I tried to tell her,” Miss Aramat says, wiping a bloody smear from underneath Porcelina’s left eye. “I tried to tell her we wanted nothing to do with the goddamned thing.”

“Is that why you killed her?” Dancy asks her.

Miss Aramat wipes away another splotch of blood, and then she closes Porcelina’s eyes. “I can’t remember why I killed her,” she says. “I knew for certain, only a moment ago, but now I can’t remember. Do you know, Biancabella?”

“You were angry,” Biancabella replies, alert and keeping her eyes on the sword in Dancy’s hands. “You were afraid.”

“Was I? Well, there you go, then. Biancabella’s hardly ever wrong.”

“Are you going to kill us all now?” Alma asks Dancy. “We wouldn’t really have hurt you, you know, not really. We were only – ”

“Jesus *Christ*,” Biancabella hisses. “You only wanted to cook her with plantains. Shut up, or I’ll kill you myself.”

“I’m leaving now,” Dancy says, and she takes another step away from the door to the Crimson Room, still holding the sword out in front of her like a shield. Alma and Candida step out of her way.

“Thank you, oh, thank you,” Alma gushes. “We wouldn’t have hurt you, not really. We would never, ever – ”

“Alma, I *told* you to shut the fuck up!”

“I’m sorry,” and then Alma’s backing away from Dancy and Biancabella both, pressing herself insect-flat against the wall. “I won’t say anything else, I promise. I’m sorry I ever said anything at all.”

“Get the hell out of here, girl,” Biancabella growls. “*Now*, before I change my mind. I don’t give a shit what happened in there, you couldn’t kill all of us.”

Dancy glances at the sword, and then nods once, because she knows that Biancabella’s probably right. What she came to do is finished, so it doesn’t matter anyway. She turns and hurries towards the front door.

Outside, the first watery grey-blue hints of dawn wash through the window set into the front door, and she never thought she'd see daylight again.

"Stop!" Miss Aramat shouts, and when she stands up, Porcelina's body rolls forward and tumbles loudly to the bottom of the stairs.

So close, Dancy thinks, *so close.* Only two or three more steps and she would have been out the door and running down the street, and she wouldn't have looked back at the house even once.

"It doesn't end this way," Miss Aramat says, and when Dancy turns around, the china-doll woman's holding a revolver pointed at her. "Not in my house, missy. You don't come into my house and make threats and then walk out the front door like nothing's happened."

"Let her go," Biancabella says. "It's not worth it."

"We have to have a feast to remember Porcelina by, don't we? We'll have to have something *special*," and Miss Aramat pulls the trigger. There's a small, hard *click* as the hammer falls on an empty chamber.

"I didn't come for you," Dancy says, and she tightens her grip on the sword because it's the only thing left to hold onto. "You're nothing but a wicked, crazy woman."

"And *you*," Aramat scowls, "you think you're any better? You're so goddamn high and mighty, standing there on the side of the goddamn angels, and we're nothing but shit, is that it?"

"Please, Aramat," Biancabella begs. "We'll find something else for Porcelina's feast, something truly special. We'll take the car and drive down to St. Augustine."

"*Look* at her, Biancabella. *She's* the monster. She has the marks," and Miss Aramat pulls the revolver's trigger again, and again there's only the impotent taunt of the hammer falling on an empty chamber.

"Let her *go*, Aramat," and now Biancabella's moving towards the stairs. She shoves Isolde aside and almost trips over Porcelina's corpse. "She's *nothing* to us. She's just someone's fucking puppet."

"I didn't come for you," Dancy says again.

"'I *will* kiss thy mouth, Jokanaan,'" Miss Aramat whispers, and the third time she squeezes the trigger the revolver explodes in a deafening flash of fire and thunder, tearing itself apart, and the shrapnel takes her hands and face with it, buries a chunk of steel the size of a grape between her eyes. One of the fragments grazes Biancabella's left cheek, digging a

bloody furrow from the corner of her mouth to her ear. She stands, helpless, at the bottom of the stairs as Aramat crumples and falls.

Dancy Flammarion doesn't wait to see whatever does or doesn't come next. She drops the sword and runs, out the front door of the big house on East Hall Street, across the wide yard, and the new day wraps her safe in redeeming charcoal wings and hides her steps.

Not yet noon, and already it's a hundred degrees in the shade, and the Bailiff is sitting alone on the rusted rear bumper of the Monte Carlo drinking an RC Cola. The sun a proper demon overhead, and he holds the cool bottle pressed to his forehead for a moment and squints into the mirage shimmer writhing off the blacktop. Dancy Flammarion is walking towards him up the entrance ramp to the interstate, a small girl-shape beneath a huge black umbrella, coming slowly, stubbornly through the heat-bent summer day. A semi rushes past, roars past, and there's wind for a moment, though it isn't a cool wind. The truck rattles away, and once again the only sound is the droning rise and fall of cicadas. The Bailiff finishes his drink and tosses the empty bottle into the marsh at the side of the road; he takes a blue paisley bandanna from his back pocket and wipes the sweat from his face and bald head.

"A man needs a hat in a place like this," he says, and Dancy stops a few feet from the car and watches him. She's wearing a pair of sunglasses that look like she must have found them lying by the side of the road, the left lens cracked and the bridge held together with a knotted bit of nylon fishing twine.

"You set me up, old man," she says to him. "You set us all up, didn't you?"

"Maybe a nice straw Panama hat, something to keep the sun from cooking my brains. Didn't Clark Gable wear one of those in *Gone with the Wind?*"

"Was it the bottle, or the boy?"

The Bailiff stuffs the blue bandanna back into his trouser pocket and winks at Dancy. "It was the bottle," he says. "And the boy, and some other people you best hope you never have to meet face to face."

"And the women?"

"No. It didn't really ever have anything much to do with the Ladies."

“Aramat’s dead,” she says, and then another truck roars by, whipping the trash and grit at the side of the interstate into a whirlwind. When it’s gone, Dancy wipes the dust off her clothes.

“It was an accident,” she says.

“Well now, that’s a shame, I guess. I’d honestly hoped it wouldn’t come to that,” and the Bailiff shades his eyes and glances up at the sun. “But it was always only a matter of time. Some people are just too damn mean and crazy for their own good. Anyway, I imagine Biancabella can take care of things now.”

“I don’t understand.”

“What don’t you understand, Dancy Flammarion?”

“The boy. I mean, whose side are you on?”

The Bailiff laughs softly to himself, and reaches for the bandanna again.

“You’ve got a lot to learn, child. You’re a goddamn holy terror, all right, but you’ve got a *lot* to learn.”

She stares at him silently, her eyes hidden behind the broken sunglasses, while the Bailiff blows his nose into the bandanna and the cicadas scream at each other.

“Can I have my duffel bag back?” she says. “I left it in your car.”

“Wouldn’t you rather have a ride? This sun isn’t good for regular folks. I hate to think what it’ll do to an albino. You’re starting to turn pink already.”

Dancy looks at her forearm, frowns, and then looks back at the Bailiff.

“What about the others?” she asks.

The Bailiff raps his knuckles twice on the trunk. “Dead to the world,” he says. “At least until sunset. And I owe you one after – ”

“You don’t owe me nothing,” Dancy says.

“Then think of it as a temporary cease-fire. It’ll be a nice change, having someone to talk to who still breathes.”

Dancy stares at the Monte Carlo, at the Bailiff, and then at the endless, broiling ribbon of I-16 stretching away north and west towards Atlanta and the mountains.

“But I’m not even sure where I’m going.”

“I thought that’s why you have an angel, to tell you these things?”

“It will, eventually.”

“Well, it’s only a couple of hours to Macon. How’s that for a start?”

In the marsh, a bird calls out, long-legged swamp bird, and Dancy turns her head and watches as the egret spreads its wide alabaster wings and flaps away across the cordgrass, something black and squirming clutched in its long beak.

“It’s a start,” she says, but waits until the egret is only a smudge against the blue-white sky before she closes the umbrella and follows the Bailiff into the shade of the car.

For Dame Darcy. Shine on.

Les Fleurs Empoisonnées

I saw this house in Savannah, but I owe the story to an illustration by Dame Darcy. An exquisitely ghoulish tableaux of a lesbian sisterhood engaged in every profane rite, that was the true inspiration. The talking taxidermied bear with his red fez, he’s my favorite bit.

Night Story 1973

with Poppy Z. Brite

“‘It rained and it rained and it rained,’” the old woman said, reading aloud from *Winnie-the-Pooh*. She held the book up close to her face, squinting to see the words by the yellow-orange light of the kerosene lantern. “‘Piglet told himself that never in all his life and *he* was goodness knows *how* old – three, was it, or four? – never had he seen so much rain,’” and then she paused, lifting her head to stare at the front door of the two-room mountain cabin she shared with her grandson, whose name was Ghost.

“‘Days and days and days,’” said Ghost with just a touch of impatience, prompting her. But then he, too, sat up straighter in bed and stared at the door, recognizing the alert uneasiness on his grandmother’s face.

“Ghost child, if you already know this story by heart, why am I bothering to read it to you?” But she didn’t take her eyes off the door as she spoke, the door and the rainslick windows on either side of it. Those windows worried her most of all. Nothing to see out there but the stormy night, blacker than pitch in a bucket, black as a coal miner’s ass, except for the brief and thunderous flashes of lightning.

“What did you see, Dee?” Her name was Deliverance, Miss Deliverance to most everybody, and Dee-for-short only to this boy. Deliverance frowned and nodded her head, nodded it very slowly, and then she looked back down at the familiar pages of the book.

“I didn’t see nothing at all,” she said. “I expect it was just a dog.”

“Which?”

“Which what?”

The boy sighed, leaned back into his big, goose-down pillow. A small, vertical line appeared between his eyebrows, more than a hint of impatience now, that suspicious expression far too mature for his six and a half years. “Which one *was* it?” he asked. “Was it nothing or was it a dog? It can’t be both.”

“You know, boy, sometimes you sound just like your mama,” and sometimes he could look like her too, but Deliverance didn’t say that. Hard enough thinking it, seeing the careless bits and pieces of her only daughter

in his fox-sharp face, her eyes become his eyes, irises the pale blue of a clear dawn. She reached out and brushed Ghost's long hair from his face, that cornsilk hair so blonde it was white, or as good as white.

"Nothing," she said. "I didn't see nothing. So don't you worry." But there were no secrets between these two, and she knew he didn't believe her. Instead of pretending to, he pointed at *Winnie-the-Pooh*.

"'It rained and it rained and it rained,'" he said.

"Ghost, honey, why don't we read something else? Something where it *ain't* raining so much. Maybe that one about old Eeyore losing his tail, or Kanga and Baby Roo coming to the Hundred-Acre Wood."

Ghost looked disappointed, then frowned and glanced up at the ceiling of the little house. The storm drummed at the tin roof with a thousand fingers, the icy late-October rain that had started a few hours before sunset and showed no signs of letting up anytime soon. The wind roared and rattled the roof, trying hard to find a way in, trying to help the rain, and he was pretty sure this storm wasn't just any storm. This storm was *mean*. This storm, he thought, wouldn't mind hurting them, picking them up like Dorothy Gale and blowing them all the way to Oz or someplace not so nice.

"It's after me, ain't it, 'cause of what I done down at the creek yesterday, at the rocks?"

The old woman closed the book and laid it down next to the lantern on the small, walnut-burl table beside the bed.

"It's only a thunderstorm," she said stern, trying hard to sound convincing. "Storms don't come looking for people. You know that, don't you?"

"I think this one is," he replied. "This one's come out looking for me," and then lightning so bright that it might have been the Second Coming, cold wash of noonday brilliance to drown the inside of the little house. The old woman turned towards the window, turned fast but not nearly fast enough, too old to be racing lightning, and the windows were already black again. Nothing there but thunder and the rain streaking window glass.

"That was its eyes," Ghost said. "It has big shining eyes so it can see where it's going in the dark."

And Deliverance turned back to her strange, pale grandson snuggled into his nest of old quilts and a mint-green blanket she'd bought at Woolworth's years ago. The big flannel shirt he always slept in, a work shirt

that had been his grandfather's once upon a time, to keep him warm and safe from his dreams. She took a deep breath and leaned closer to him.

"Ghost, you listen to me now and pay attention," she said, using the sober, old-womanly voice she always reserved for the things that she had to be certain he understood, copperheads and steel-jaw traps, poisonous mushrooms and the leaf-covered pits of abandoned wells.

"I'm listening, Dee," he said quietly.

"Sometimes we gotta be brave, even when we're scared. We gotta not let being scared keep us from thinking straight. That's all brave is, boy, when you come right down to it, not letting the fear get you so turned around you start doing stupid things, instead of what you know you *ought* to do."

"I didn't know about the rocks," the boy whispered, and he looked away from her, watching the flame of the lantern instead.

"Ain't nobody blaming you. I should'a told you about that old pile of stones a long, long time ago. But sometimes a body forgets things, even important things like them stones. All that matters *now*, Ghost, is that we do the stuff we know we gotta do and don't get so scared we forget anything else important."

"Like the salt?" he asked solemnly, and she nodded her head, even though she knew the storm had surely washed away the double ring of salt she'd carefully sprinkled around the house that afternoon. There were still neat white lines of it on the thresholds and window sills.

"Yes. Like the salt," she said. "And the chamomile and St. John's wort."

And then Ghost sat up again and pointed at *Winnie-the-Pooh*, where Deliverance had set the book down on the table beside the bed.

"How about we read 'In Which Pooh Goes Visiting and Gets into a Tight Place'?" he asked. "There ain't too much rain in that one, is there?"

"Maybe you best get some sleep. It's almost midnight."

He shook his head no. "I ain't sleepy."

"I didn't ask if you were, now did I? And don't say 'ain't.'" She scowled at him, but picked the book back up off the table anyway. "It's bad grammar. I ain't having people thinking my grandbaby's no better educated than some ignorant hillbilly."

"But *you* say *ain't* all the time, Dee. You just said it."

"When did I say it?"

“Just *now*.”

“Well, I’m old,” she said. “It’s too late for me,” and she opened the book to Chapter Two and began to read, but Deliverance listened, too, to the wind blowing wild through the trees, the rain on the roof, the thunder rolling like angel voices across the valley.

“‘Well, Edward Bear, known to all his friends as Winnie-the-Pooh, or Pooh for short, was walking through the forest one day,’” she read, and far away, off towards the creek and the place where the sandstone bluffs got steep on their way up to the bald crest of Lazarus Mountain, there was another sound. The one she’d been waiting for all night long, the reason she’d drawn hex signs on all the doors with a piece of chalk. She didn’t have to ask him to know Ghost had heard it, too, the wary flicker in his pale eyes all she needed to tell her that he had, and so she kept reading about Pooh gone to see Rabbit, and tried to remember if the shotgun on the big table across the room was loaded.

Sixty years since the first time Deliverance saw the pile of stones by Lame Rabbit Creek; 1913 and she was barely eight years old, the same year her mother married a tall, red-bearded blacksmith from Tennessee who made horseshoes and axe heads and lightning rods. Deliverance would go down to the gurgling, snake-winding creek with her mother and together they would pick watercress and dandelion greens and look for sassafras trees growing along the banks. Sometimes they would sit very still and quiet in the bright patches where the sun found its way through the sheltering oak and sycamore branches overhead, dangle their bare feet in the cold water, and wait for deer or raccoons to come down to the creek for a drink. Sometimes they saw otters or mink, and once, a bobcat that sat and stared back at them warily from a tangled hawthorn thicket.

Her mother showed her fossil sea shells embedded in the mossy rock walls of the creek, proof of Noah’s flood, taught her the difference between the harmless water snakes and cottonmouth moccasins. And “This here creek runs all the way down to the sea,” she would say, as if maybe Deliverance had forgotten since the last time. “All the way to the Pee Dee River and the South Carolina marshes and finally out to the wide Atlantic Ocean.”

But on the late September day they found the stones it wasn’t sunny, and her mother hadn’t said much of anything, one of her silent, melancholy

moods, and Deliverance kept running on ahead alone, threading her way expertly through the ferns and pricking creeper vines. The two of them strayed farther up the creek than they'd ever gone before, wandering past a wide, beaver-dammed pool and then the creek bed made a sharp bend and disappeared into a dense wall of tall, dead trees. Twisted, rotting trunks stripped of bark, stark branches naked except for the clustered, infesting growths of mistletoe and green-brown fungi. The trees seemed to have grown too close together, to lean towards one another, intertwining and blotting out the cloudy sky.

"Livvy, stop!" her mother shouted, but she'd already gone past the first of the dead trees, stood among them looking back out at her mother.

"Come on back now, baby," her mother said, whispered urgently, and she motioned to the girl. "We shouldn't be here. This is…" and she hesitated, looking up at the ugly, ancient trees, the birch and hickory corpses standing guard like a column of wooden soldiers. "This is a bad place," she said, sounding frightened, and Deliverance couldn't remember her mother ever having been afraid of the woods before. Cautious, because there were things that could hurt them if they weren't careful where they put their feet or what they touched, but never frightened.

"No, I want to *see*," she said, and turned and ran deeper into the stand of dead trees.

Later, Deliverance clearly remembered the sound of her mother calling after her, the crunchy rustle of her mother's feet running through fallen leaves, but she could never recall exactly why she'd disobeyed, why she'd turned and run away laughing. Even then, some small part of her understood what her mother was saying, could feel the sick and spiteful energy rising from the trees like heat from a crackling fire. Sometimes, she would think there had been a voice, another child's sweet, inviting voice, calling her to come and play. And other times, it would seem as though there might have been an unseen hand pushing or pulling at her, driving or dragging her on as the trunks of the trees closed in tight around her.

"Deliverance!" her mother cried out, sounding at least a hundred miles away.

Towards the end, there was hardly enough room left to squeeze between the trees, and she couldn't help but touch their raw bones, that malevolent wood slick with the things that lived off decay. Her arms and hands and face, her dress, smeared with the corrupt and stinking juices that

leaked from everything she touched. Then it was over and she stood alone in a small clearing on the bank of Lame Rabbit Creek, and the pile of stones was waiting for her there. The stand of dead trees entirely surrounded the clearing, encircling it in a protective shroud. The creek wound down the middle, dividing it neatly in half.

The cairn was nearly as tall as Deliverance, each and every charcoal-grey stone so smooth, so evenly shaped, round and flat as a pan of cornbread, dark as the cloud-bruised sky overhead. There were glinting, crystal flecks of mica and quartz in them, and no moss or lichens growing anywhere on the stones, as though someone came here every day and scrubbed them clean.

She held her hand out just a few inches above the topmost stone and saw that there was something carved there, circles held within circles, wheels within wheels like what the prophet Ezekiel saw come down to him from Heaven. And a voice that wasn't a voice murmured words she didn't hear, but felt through the tips of her outstretched fingers; the kindest, most beautiful voice she'd ever imagined and somehow it knew her name.

"No!" her mother shouted. "Don't you touch it!"

Deliverance looked back at her, but all she could see was a pale, terrified face, her mother's face framed by a gap in the trees much too narrow for an adult to ever squeeze through.

"Come back to me, Livvy. Come back exactly the way you got in there and don't touch *anything*."

"It won't hurt me, Mama. It already promised it won't hurt me. It's just lonesome," but her mother was shaking her head, straining desperately to reach her through the narrow gap in the dead trees.

"Don't be afraid," Deliverance said, and turned back to the cairn again, the honey and summer sunlight voice seeping up from it, and in the last second before she touched the intricately carved surface of the stone, she *might* have seen something rising from the rippling creek. Something vast and glistening, with a crown of eyes that blazed like the coals in her stepfather's furnace, eyes like red-hot iron. And then her hand hurt, and there was only the sound of her mother screaming before there was nothing at all.

Somewhere in the short space between Pooh getting wedged in Rabbit's front door and Christopher Robin reading the bear a Sustaining

Book, Ghost drifted away, sleep not nearly as far off as he'd thought, the rhythm of the rain and his grandmother's voice to lull him reluctantly down. But he only fought a little, blinked himself awake once or twice to the storybook rise and fall of Deliverance's words that sent him right back to the soft, indefinite places dividing wakefulness from dreams. Not far to fall, to settle slow, like a yellow-gold leaf to the sandy, pebble-littered bottom of a stream.

"No, the Indians," she said, offering up the answer to a question he didn't remember asking, his grandmother but in this dream her hair wasn't grey and the splotches on the backs of her hands were gone; her skin as smooth as his mother's was before she got sick and died, the mother he remembers mostly when he's asleep, and sometimes he thinks she's only a dream, the kind that were never true and never will be, and his real mother is Deliverance, after all.

"The Cherokee people who lived here before us," his grandmother said. "They put the stones there."

Ghost was sitting on a chair in a small room that smelled too much like dying, the brittle winter scent like peppermint tea and stinging red centipedes, *that* smell, and men and women sat or stood around a bed. Only candlelight, and he thought the child lying on the bed might be where the death smell was coming from, the girl with raven hair and wildflowers strewn about on her pillow. One of the women leaned down and wiped the sweat from her forehead with a damp cloth, and one of the men began praying quietly to himself. Log cabin walls, one small window with a pane of cloudy thick glass and outside the night so full of stars that Ghost thought the sky must have exploded.

"She's so hot," one of the women said, the one who'd wiped the little girl's forehead. "I swear, I think she's gonna burn up alive."

Another woman was sitting on the edge of the bed holding a small, cobalt-blue jar, an ointment or salve that she was rubbing into the skin of the little girl's right hand. The hand was swollen and purple and looked snake bit. He'd seen a beagle that was snake bit once, and that was the way its paw looked.

"But there were other things here before the Indians," his grandmother said, the young woman standing beside him. She pointed to the dying girl on the bed. "I opened my eyes that night, and there was this white-haired boy child watching me from that very chair you're sitting in. I thought he

was an angel. I thought he was the Angel of Death come to take me away with him."

"I didn't know," he whispered, afraid the girl would open her eyes and look at him and see an angel instead of a boy named Ghost. "I didn't know what was under the rocks."

"Nobody's blaming you," his grandmother said. "This ain't your fault. This ain't nobody's fault."

And then Ghost looked at the window again and saw what was looking in, watching them, and he started to scream, opened his mouth wide so the sound rushing up from his belly wouldn't tear him apart trying to find its way out. But the sickroom had already dissolved, like sugar in scalding coffee, melting so only the taste remains, and he was wet and sailing through the storm-lashed night on the back of a great black bird.

"Don't you fall," the bird cawed, a crow or an eagle or maybe even an owl, all of those or nothing he'd ever seen before, and Ghost dug his fingers deeply into its feathered shoulders. Its wings rose and fell, rose and fell, and Ghost looked down at the world so small and wet below them.

"You be careful back there," the bird said. "I should think poor old Rabbit is about flooded out by this time."

Lightning and thunder and below them Lazarus Mountain and Big Henry Mountain and all the others flinched and cringed at the terrible commotion from above. Ghost knew they would hide from the violent sky, if there were anywhere for them to go, any sanctuary for a mountain, and then he saw the things marching single file up the narrow dirt road that led to his grandmother's house. Dancing things with torches, and some of them had long, sharp sticks that they jabbed at the sky and each other.

Deliverance put her thin arms around his waist, and he wanted to ask her how she got way up here on the bird with him when she wasn't there just a second ago, why she had to get old again, wanted to ask a lot of questions, but she said, "Hold on, Ghost child. Hold on tight as you can." So that was what he did. And the great bird folded its wings and swept lower so that Ghost could see the faces of the loping, trotting, prancing things, their dog-snarls and vicious, blazing eyes.

"The rocks didn't hurt me," he said to his grandmother. "They didn't burn me when I touched them."

"You got magic about you," she said. "A fierce magic and sometimes it keeps you safe."

One of the dancing things stopped dancing, stood in the mud and the muddy water rushing about its splayed hind feet, and it pointed a crooked finger up at the bird and Ghost and the old woman flying above it through the rain.

“You gotta go back now, Ghost,” his grandmother said. “You gotta wake up,” but he didn’t want to. Thought if he could dream all this maybe he could also dream himself back into the clearing, back to the day before when he went walking in the woods alone, splashed up Lame Rabbit Creek and found those strange, dead trees and the pile of stones in the clearing. Back to the moment before he lifted the top stone off and heard the whistling deep beneath his feet, the whispering, eager voices that wanted in his head but couldn’t find their way. And then he wouldn’t have to do or see any of this, and the storm wouldn’t come looking for them, or the long-legged, dancing things, and he’d never even have this dream.

“Sorry, but it don’t work that way,” his grandmother said, sounding like she wished it did, sounding tired and afraid and old, and then the wind turned her into dust and fallen leaves and she blew away.

“Wake up, Ghost,” the bird screeched, spreading its dark wings almost as wide as the stormy Appalachian night. “Wake up right this minute or you’ll fall, and that’s what they’ve wanted all along,” and then one of the things crouched in the muddy road below them hurled its sharpened stick, a bewitched and tainted spear to shatter the sky itself and Ghost tumbled through the mad cacophony of thunder and gunpowder, time and breaking glass.

Deliverance sat in the dark in her rocking chair a few feet from the front door of the little house. Oak rocker that was her mother’s before her, and the big shotgun that was her husband’s across her lap. The Winchester 12-gauge he used for hunting squirrels and possums, fat tom turkeys and coons, but she figured it’d work just fine on whatever had been scratching at the door for the last hour or so. Outside, the wind was a bold and fleshless demon, battering the world with cold, invisible fists. Perdition come crawling out from under a rock, spilled from the prison that had held it since the continent seethed with buffalo, and white men were only a distant nightmare for shamans to keep to themselves.

“Don’t you think I don’t know you,” she said, talking to the other side of the door, talking to keep herself alert, just to keep herself company. But

the storm made it hard to hear herself, so Deliverance raised her voice. “I know you! I *know* what you are!” she shouted. “I know who you are and what you’ve come here after!”

And she couldn’t be sure if what she heard next was laughter, mocking laughter for a presumptuous old woman who thought she could slay dragons with birdshot, or if it was just a fancy new trick of the wind. One or the other and it really didn’t matter which; something to make *her* blink first, to get the best of her and then it would all be over in a heartbeat. She concentrated on the words and symbols drawn on the door instead, Bible verses and darker phrases, chalk and the paste she’d made from arrowroot and angelica and chicken blood.

“Oh, I know you. Yes, sir. I *remember* you. I got this scar right here on my hand so I won’t never forget.”

She held up her right hand, held it palm out and never mind the thick pine door or the charms scrawled there, she knew that the thing on the other side wouldn’t have any trouble at all seeing the crooked pink-white scar cutting her life line in half, dividing soul line and heart line. That scar she’d carried with her sixty long years and it still looked so fresh, so raw, she might have gotten it a few months ago; might only have grabbed the handle of a hot skillet or burned herself trying to light the water heater.

The taunting, snickering sound again, then, but much louder than before. *It’s laughing at me,* she though. *You ain’t fooling nobody but yourself, old woman.* Deliverance put her hand back down and swallowed, a rasping, sore-throat swallow because the spit in her mouth had dried up; she took a deep breath and slipped her index finger around the trigger of the shotgun.

You ain’t fooling nobody at all.

There was a flash of lightning, the stormy, mountain night stripped straight down to broad daylight, and for the stingiest part of a second she could see it standing out there in the wind, glaring in at her through one of the windows. Brief glimpse of shaggy, stooped shoulders and spindle arms, a horsey-long face and black wolf-lips curled into a sneer or a hateful grin, snaggled teeth, and then Deliverance shut her eyes. Squeezed them shut tight and counted, one, two, three, four, waiting for the thunder and when she opened them again the night had washed mercifully back over the hollow, and there was nothing out there but the rain pelting hard against the windowpanes.

You didn't see anything out there but what you were afraid you'd see. You didn't see anything at all.

But then came the immediate and scraping sound of claws on the door to contradict her, and the knob began to turn, teasing, slow game of clockwise and counterclockwise motion, and she raised the shotgun, set the brass butt plate against her shoulder and aimed the barrel at the door.

"Come on ahead then, you old bastard. But you ain't getting him, not this night or the next," she said, trying hard not to sound afraid, trying to sound like she believed a single word of it herself. Just a little more pressure on the trigger and the Winchester would tear the night to smoky shreds.

"No, Dee," Ghost said. "That's not the way it ends," speaking very softly, calm and velvet-edged words from his lips held close to her left ear. A warm pool of light from the oil lantern he carried, and she hadn't even heard him get out of bed, the storm raging too loud, all her attention focused on the door.

"I *saw* it out there, grinning in at me, *daring* me," she said. "You stay behind me, boy." But Ghost took a step closer to the door instead, put one hand on the barrel of the shotgun and gently pushed it aside and down towards the floor.

"I called it out," Ghost said, turning towards his grandmother and his pale eyes glinted like the thumbprints of God, two shining points of certainty in the fickle, faithless night. "I didn't mean to, but that's what I done. Now I gotta send it back."

And she watched, helpless, too exhausted or afraid to argue, as he stepped past her and stood in front of the door, her crude charms visible in the flickering, pale wash of orange light. Ghost touched one of the chalk signs she'd made and he whispered something, but nothing she could hear, nothing meant for her anyway, and then he sat on the floor. He put the oil lamp down nearby and leaned forward, pressing himself tight against the door, and then Ghost began to trace words or shapes on the wood with one finger.

"There are *still* worse things in the world than you," he said. "Still things to watch the ways in and out of darkness," speaking louder than before, and his finger moved faster, faster, smearing the chalk and powdered herbs and dried blood, tattooing the door with his own secret ciphers. Lines of power woven from innocence and mystery and the

clammy night air, and after a moment Deliverance realized that the doorknob had stopped turning.

“Go home,” Ghost said, and the lightning flashed again, the thunder right behind it this time. “Go on home before they come looking for you.”

And then the old woman heard the sudden, feather-rough flutter of a hundred small wings, a great flock of blackbirds all taking to the air at the same instant, or the defeated sound of running feet, or nothing but the wind, shrieking cheated through the trees. Ghost glanced back at her, bright beads of sweat standing out on his sharp ashen face. The finger he’d been using slid slowly down the wood until his hand lay limp on the floor at his side.

“Is it gone?” he asked, and shut his eyes before she could reply.

Deliverance looked at the windows, at the night that was no different from any other storm-weary North Carolina night, the storm that was only rain and lightning, wind and thunder.

“Yes,” she said, “It’s over, Ghost. I think it’s all over now,” but she didn’t get up. She stayed there in her grandmother’s rocking chair, the practical, reassuring weight of the shotgun in her lap, until the rain had finally stopped and the sky turned the first purple-grey shades of dawn.

Night Story 1973

Known fact: I don’t play well with others. This is one of only four collaborations I’ve done, outside comics, out of almost two hundred short stories, novellas, and vignettes. This is the best of the lot. Here are glimpses of my childhood in Alabama, in wooded Appalachian foothills. Lazarus Mountain is mine. Ghost and Deliverance are Poppy’s, of course.

From Cabinet 34, Drawer 6

5:46 P.M.

The old theater on Asylum Street smells of stale popcorn and the spilled soft drinks that have soured on the sticky floors. The woman sitting in the very back row, the woman with the cardboard box open in her lap, shuts her eyes. A precious few seconds free of the ridiculous things on the screen, just the theater stink and the movie sounds – a scream and a splash, a gunshot – and then the man coughs again. Thin man in his navy-blue fedora and his threadbare gabardine jacket, the man with the name that sounds like an ice-cream flavor, and when she opens her eyes he's still sitting there in the row in front of her, looking at her expectantly over the back of his seat. The screen become a vast rectangular halo about his head, a hundred thousand shades of grey.

"Well," he says, "there you have it."

"I don't know what I'm seeing anymore," she says. He nods his head very slowly, up and down, up and down, like a small, pale thing on the sea. She looks up at the screen again at the man in the rubber monster suit and the flickering light, listens to the soft insectile flutter from the projector in the booth above her head.

"Just an old movie," Dr. Solomon Monalisa says, not bothering to whisper because there's no one else is in the theater but the two of them, him and her, the skinny, antique man and the bookish woman with her cardboard box. "A silly old movie to scare children at Saturday afternoon matinees, to scare teenage girls."

"Is that what it is? Is that the truth?"

"The truth," he says, smiles a tired sort of a smile and coughs again. A handkerchief from his breast pocket to wipe his thin lips clean, and then the man with the ice-cream name stares for a moment into his own spit and phlegm caught in folds of linen as though they were tea leaves and he could read the future there.

"Yes, I suppose that's what you would call it," he tells her, stuffing the soiled handkerchief back into his pocket. "You would call it that, until something better comes along."

On screen, a cavern beneath the black Amazonian lake, glycerine mist and rifle smoke, and the creature's gills rise and fall, struggling for breath; its bulging eyes are as blank and empty as the glass eyes of a taxidermied fish.

"It's almost over," Dr. Solomon Monalisa says. "Are you staying for the end?"

"I might talk," the woman whispers, even though they are alone, and the creature roars as its plated, scaly flesh its torn by bullets, by knives and spears. Rivulets of dark blood leak from its latex hide as the old man nods his head again.

"You might. You wouldn't be the first."

"Would someone try to stop me?"

"Someone already has, Miss Morrow."

And now it's her turn to nod, and she looks away from the movie screen, the man in the latex suit's big death scene up there, the creature drifting limp and lifeless to the bottom of its lonely, weedy lagoon. Lacey Morrow looks down at the box in her lap.

If I'd never found the goddamned thing, she thinks. *If someone else had found it instead of me.* All the things she would give away for that to be true, years or memories, her life if she could die without knowing the things she knows now.

"Well, there it is," Dr. Solomon Monalisa says again, as the last frames flicker past before the screen goes white and the red velvet curtain comes down and the house lights come up. "Not quite as silly as I remember. Not a bad way to pass an afternoon."

"Will they mind if I sit here a little longer?" she asks, and he shrugs his thin shoulders, stands and straightens the lapels of his jacket, fusses with the collar of his shirt.

"No," he says. "I shouldn't think they'd mind at all."

She doesn't watch him leave, keeps her eyes fixed on the box, and his shoes make small, uneven sounds against the sticky floor.

1:30 P.M.

Waking from an uneasy dream of childhood, a seashore and her sisters and something hanging in the sky, something terrible that she wouldn't look at no matter what they promised her. Lacey blinks and squints through the streaky train window at the Connecticut countryside rushing by, surely Connecticut by now, probably somewhere well past Springfield and headed

for Hartford. Crazy quilt of fields and pastureland stitched together with October leaves, the fiery boughs of birch and beech and hickory to clothe red Jurassic sandstone. Then she catches sight of the winding, silver-grey ribbon of the river to the west, flashing bright beneath the morning sun. She rubs her eyes, blinks at all that sunlight and wishes that she hadn't dozed off. But trains almost always lull her to sleep, sooner or later, the steady heartbeat rhythm of the wheels against the rails, steel-on-steel lullaby, and the more random rattle and clatter of the couplings for punctuation.

She checks to see that the cardboard box is still resting on the empty aisle seat beside her, that her satchel is still stowed safely at her feet. They are. Reassured, Lacey glances quickly about the car, slightly embarrassed at having fallen asleep. That strangers have been watching her sleep, and she might have snored or drooled or mumbled foolish things in her dreams, but the car is mostly empty, anyway – a teenage girl reading a paperback, a priest reading a newspaper – and she looks back to the window, her nightmare already fading in the warmth of the day. The train is closer to the river now, and she can see a small boat – a fishing boat, perhaps – cutting a V-shaped wake on the water.

"Have yourself a nice little nap, then?" and Lacey turns, startled, clipping the corner of the box with her elbow, and it almost tumbles to the floor before she can catch it. There's a woman in the seat directly behind her, someone she hadn't noticed only a moment before, painfully thin woman with tangled, oyster-white hair, neither very old nor very young, and she's staring at Lacey with watery blue eyes that seem to bulge slightly, intently, from their sockets. Her skin is dry and sallow, and there's a sickly, jaundiced tint to her cheeks. She's wearing a dingy black raincoat and a heavy sweater underneath, wool the color of instant oatmeal, and her nubby fingernails are painted an incongruous flamingo pink.

"I didn't mean to frighten you," the woman says in her deliberate, gravel voice, but Lacey shakes her head.

"No, it's okay. I guess I'm not quite awake, that's all."

"I was starting to think I'd have to wake you up myself," the woman says impatiently, still staring. "I'm only going as far as Hartford. I don't have the time to go any farther than that."

As she talks, Lacey has begun to notice a very faint, fishy smell, fish or low-tide mud flats, brine and silt and stranded, suffocating sea creatures.

The odor seems to be coming from the white-haired woman, her breath or her clothes, and Lacey pretends not to notice.

"You're sitting there thinking, 'Who's this lunatic?' ain't you? 'Who's this deranged woman, and how can I get her to shut the hell up and leave me alone?'"

"No, I just don't – "

"Oh, yes you are," the woman says, and she jabs an index finger at Lacey, candy-pink polish and her knuckles like dirty, old tree roots. "But that's okay. You don't know me from Adam. You aren't *supposed* to know me, Miss Morrow."

Lacey glances at the other passengers, the girl and the priest. Neither of them are looking her way, still busy with their reading, and if they've even noticed the white-haired woman they're pretending that they haven't. Not like she's their problem. Lacey says a silent, agnostic's prayer that it isn't much farther to the Hartford station; she smiles, and the woman makes a face like she's been insulted.

"It ain't *me* you got to be afraid of, Miss. Get that straight. I'm sticking my neck out, just talking to you."

"I'm very sorry," Lacey says, trying hard to sound sorry instead of nervous, instead of annoyed. "But I really don't have any idea what you're talking about."

"Me, I'm nothing but a messenger. A courier," the woman replies, lowering her voice almost to a whisper and glaring suspiciously towards the other two passengers. "Of course, that wouldn't make much difference, if you know what I mean."

"I don't have any idea what you mean."

"Well, you got the package right there," the woman says, and now she's pointing over the back of Lacey's seat at the cardboard box with the Innsmouth fossil packed inside. "That makes you a courier, too. Hell, that almost makes you a goddamn holy prophet on Judgment Day. But you probably haven't thought of it that way, have you?"

"Maybe it would be better if we talked later," Lacey whispers, playing along. The woman's probably perfectly harmless, but she puts one hand protectively on the box, anyway.

"*They* might be listening," the woman says and nods her head towards the teenager and the priest. "They might hear something we don't want them to hear."

She makes an angry, hissing sound between her yellow teeth and runs the long fingers of her left hand quickly through her tangled white hair, slicking it back against her scalp, pulling a few strands loose, and they lie like pearly threads on the shoulder of her black raincoat.

“You think you got it all figured out, don’t you?” she growls. “Put some fancy letters after your name, and you don’t need to listen to anybody or anything, ain’t that right? Can’t nobody tell you no different, ’cause you’ve seen it *all*, from top to bottom, pole to pole.”

“Calm down, *please*,” Lacey says, glancing towards the other passengers again, wishing one of them would look up so she could get their attention. “If you don’t, I’m going to have to call the conductor. Don’t make me do that.”

“Goddamn stuck-up dyke,” the woman snarls, and she spits on the floor, turns her head and stares furiously out the window with her bulging blue eyes. “You think I’m crazy. Jesus, you just wait till you come out the other side, and *then* let’s see what the hell you think sane looks like.”

“I didn’t mean to upset you,” Lacey says, standing, reaching for the satchel with her laptop. “Maybe I should just move to another seat.”

“You *do* that, Miss Morrow. Won’t be no skin off *my* nose. But you better take this with you,” and the woman’s left hand disappears inside her raincoat, reappears with a large, slightly crumpled manila envelope, and she holds it out to Lacey. “They told me you’d figure it out, so don’t ask me no more questions. I’ve already said too goddamn much as it is.”

Lacey sets her satchel down beside the cardboard box and stares at the envelope for a moment, yellow-brown paper, and there’s what looks like a grease stain at one corner.

“Well, go on ahead. It ain’t got teeth. It ain’t gonna bite you,” the white-haired woman sneers, not taking her eyes off the window, the farms and houses rushing past. “Maybe if you take it,” she says, “the scary woman will leave you alone.”

Lacey snatches the envelope, hastily gathers her things, the satchel and the box, and moves quickly up the aisle towards the front of the car. The priest and the girl don’t even look up as she passes them. *Maybe they don’t see me at all*, she thinks. *Maybe they haven’t heard a thing.* The door to the next car is stuck, and she’s wrestling with the handle when the train lurches, sways suddenly to one side, and she almost drops the box, imagines the fossil inside shattering into a hundred pieces.

Stupid girl. Stupid, silly girl.

She forces herself to be still, then, presses her forehead against the cool aluminum door. She takes a deep breath of air that doesn't smell like dead fish, that only smells like diesel fumes and disinfectant, perfectly ordinary train smells, comforting familiarity, and the cadence of the rails is the most reassuring sound in the world.

Go on ahead. It ain't got teeth. It ain't gonna bite you, the white-haired woman said, nothing at all but a crazy lady that someone ought to be watching out for, not letting her ride about on trains harassing people. Lacey looks down at the grease-stained envelope in her hand, held tenuously between her right thumb and forefinger.

"Do you need me to help you with that?" and it's only the priest, scowling up at her from his newspaper; he sighs a loud, irritated sigh and points at the exit. "Would you like me to get the *door* for you?"

"Yes," she says. "Thank you, Father. I'd really appreciate it. My hands are full."

Lacey glances anxiously past him towards the back of the car, and there's no sign of the white-haired woman now, but the door at the other end is standing wide open.

"There," the priest says, and she smiles and thanks him again.

"No problem," he says, and as she steps into the short connecting corridor, he continues speaking in low, conspiratorial tones, "But don't wait too long to have a look at what's in that envelope she gave you. There may not be much time left." Then the door slides shut again, and Lacey turns and runs to the crowded refuge of the next car.

Her twenty-fifth birthday, the stormy day in early July when Lacey Morrow found the Innsmouth fossil, working late and alone in the basement of the Pratt Museum. Almost everyone else gone home already, but there was nothing unusual about that. Lacey pouring over the contents of Cabinet 34, drawers of Devonian fishes collected from Blossburg, Pennsylvania and Chaleur Bay, Quebec, slabs of shale and sandstone the dusky color of charcoal, the color of cinnamon; ancient lungfish and the last of the jawless ostracoderms, lobe-finned *Eusthenopteron* and the boxy armour plates of the antiarch *Bothriolepis*. Relics of an age come and gone hundreds of millions of years before the dinosaurs, a time when the earliest forests lined the shores of lakes and rivers teeming with strange and monstrous fish, and

vertebrates had begun to take their first clumsy steps onto dry land. And that transition has been her sole, consuming obsession since Lacey was an undergraduate, that alchemy of flesh and bone – fins to feet, gills to lungs – the puzzles that filled her days and nights, that filled her dreams. Her last girlfriend walking out because she'd finally had enough of Lacey's all-night kitchen dissections, the meticulously mutilated sea bass and cod, eels and small sharks sliced up and left lying about until she found time to finish her notes and sketches. Dead things in plastic bags crammed into the freezer, and the ice cubes starting to taste like bad sushi, their Hitchcock Road apartment stinking of formalin and fish markets.

"If I grow fucking scales maybe I'll give you a call sometime," Julie said, hauling her boxes of clothes and CDs from their front porch to the back of her banged-up little car. "If I ever meet up with a goddamn mermaid, I'll be sure to give her your number."

Lacey watched her drive away, feeling less than she knew she *ought* to feel, wishing she would cry because any normal person would cry, would at least be angry with herself or with Julie. But the tears never came, nor the anger, and after that she figured it was better to leave romantic entanglements for some later stage in her life, some faraway day when she could spare a spark of passion for anything except her studies. She kept a picture of Julie in a pewter frame beside her bed, though, so she could still pretend, from time to time, when she felt alone, when she awoke in the middle of the night and there was nothing but the sound of rain on the roof and the wind blowing cold through the streets of Amherst.

But that August afternoon she wasn't lonely, not with the tall rows of battleship-grey steel lane cabinets and their stony treasures stacked neatly around her, all the company she needed and no thoughts but the precise numbers from her digital calipers – the heights and widths of pelvic girdles and scapulocoracoids, relative lengths of pectoral fins and radials. She was finishing up with a perfectly preserved porolepiform that she suspected might be a new species, and Lacey noticed the box pushed all the way to the very back of the drawer, half-hidden under a cardboard tray of shale and bone fragments. Something overlooked, even though she'd thought she knew the contents of those cabinets like the back of her hand, and any further surprises would only be in the details.

"Well, hello there," she said to the box, carefully slipping it from its hiding place beneath the tray. "How'd I ever miss you?" It wasn't a small

box – only a couple of inches deep, but easily a foot and a half square, sagging just a bit at the center from having supported the weight of the tray for who knows how many years. There was writing on one corner of the lid, spidery fountain-pen ink faded as brown as dead leaves: *from Naval dredgings,* USS Cormorant *(April, 1928), Lat. 42° 40” N., Long. 70° 43” W, NE. of old Innsmouth Harbor, Essex Co., Mass. ?Devonian.* But there was more, no catalog or field number, no identification either, and then Lacey opened the box and stared amazed at the thing inside.

“Jesus,” she whispered, swallowing a metallic taste like foil or a freshly filled tooth, adrenaline-silver aftertaste. Her first impression was that the thing was a hand, the articulated skeleton of a human hand lying palm-side up in the box, its fingers slightly curled and clutching at the ceiling or the bright fluorescent lights overhead. She set the box down on one of the larger Chaleur Bay slabs then, stared in turn at the tips of her own trembling fingers and the petrified bones resting in a bed of excelsior. The fossil was dark, the waxy black of baker’s chocolate, and shiny from a thick coating of varnish or shellac.

No, not human, but certainly the forelimb of *something*, something big, at least a third again larger than her own hand. “Jesus,” she whispered again. Lacey lifted the fossil from the excelsior, gently because there was no telling how stable it was, how many decades since anyone had even bothered to open the box. She counted almost all the elements of the manus – carpals and metacarpals, phalanges – and the lower part of the forearm, sturdy radius and ulna ending abruptly in a ragged break, the dull glint of gypsum or quartz flakes showing from the exposed interior of the fossil. There was bony webbing or spines preserved between the fingers, and the three that were complete ended in short, sharp ungual claws. There was a small patch of what appeared to be scales or dermal ossicles on the palm just below the fifth metacarpal, oval disks with deeply concave centers unlike anything she could remember ever having seen before. Here and there, small bits of greenish-grey limestone still clung to the bones, but most of the hard matrix had been scraped away.

Lacey sat down on a wooden stool near Cabinet 34, her dizzy head too full of questions and astonishment, heart racing, the giddy, breathless excitement of discovery, and she forced herself to shut her eyes for a moment. Gathering shreds of calm from the darkness behind her lids, counting backwards from thirty until her pulse began to return to normal.

She opened her eyes again and turned the fossil over to examine the other side. The bone surface on the back of the hand was not so well preserved, weathered as though that side had been exposed to the forces of erosion for some time before it was collected, the smooth, cortical layer cracked and worn completely away in places. There was a lot more of the greenish limestone matrix left on that side, too, and a small snail's shell embedded in the rock near the base of the middle finger.

"What *are* you?" she asked the fossil, as if it might tell her, as simple as that, and everything else forgotten now, all her fine coelacanths and rhipidistians, for this newest miracle. Lacey turned it over again, examining the palm-side more closely, the pebbly configuration of wrist bones, quickly identifying the ulnare, what she thought must be the intermedium, and when she finally glanced at her watch it was almost six-thirty. At least an hour had passed since she'd opened the box, and she'd have to hurry to make her seven o'clock lecture. She returned the hand to the excelsior, paused a moment for one last, lingering glimpse of the thing before putting the lid back on. Overhead, high above the exhibits halls and the slate-tiled roof of the Pratt Museum, a thunderclap boomed and echoed across the valley, and Lacey tried to remember if she'd left her umbrella in her apartment.

1:49 P.M.

She's sitting next to a woman who smells like wintergreen candy and mothballs, listening to the steady *clackclackclack* of razor wheels against the rails. Lacey's been staring at the photograph from the manila envelope for almost five minutes now. A movie still, she thinks, the glossy black-and-white photograph creased and dog-eared at one corner, and it shows an old man with a white mustache standing with two Indians beside a rocky outcrop. Someplace warm, someplace tropical because there are palmetto fronds at one edge of the photograph. It isn't hot on the train, but Lacey's sweating, anyway, her palms gone slick and clammy, tiny beads like nectar standing out on her forehead and upper lip. The old man in the photograph is holding something cradled in both hands, clutching it like a holy relic, a grail, the prize at the end of a life-long search.

…'cause you've seen it all, from top to bottom and pole to pole…

The man in the photograph is holding the Innsmouth fossil. Or he's holding a replica so perfect that it must have been cast from the original, and it really doesn't make much difference, either way. She turns the picture

over, and there's a label stuck to the back – Copyright © 1954 Uiversal-Iteratioal – typed with a typewriter that drops its N's.

There was a letter in the envelope, as well. A faded photocopy of a letter, careless, sprawling handwriting that she can only just decipher:

Mr. Zacharias R. Gilman, Esq.
7 High Street
Ipswich, Mass.

15 January 1952

Mr. William Alland
Universal Studios
Los Angeles, Cal.

Dear Mr. Alland,

Sir, I have seen your fine horror picture "It Came From Outer Space" six times as of this writing and must say that I am in all ways impressed with your work. You have a true artist's eye for the uncanny and deserve to be proud of your endeavors. I am enclosing newspaper clippings which may be of some small interest to a mind such as yours, regarding certain peculiar things that have gone on hereabouts for years. Old people here talk about the "plagues" of 1846, but they will tell you it wasn't really no plague that set old Innsmouth on the road to ruin, if you've a mind to listen. They will tell you lots of things, Mr. Alland, and I lie awake at night thinking about what might still go on out there at the reef. But you read the newspaper clippings for yourself, sir, and make of it what you will. I believe you might fashion a frightful film from these incidents. I will be at this address through May, should you wish to reply.

Respectfully, your avid admirer,
Zacharias Gilman

"Do you like old monster movies?" the wintergreen and mothball woman asks her, and Lacey shakes her head no.

"Well, that photograph, that's a scene from – "

"I don't watch television," she says.

“Oh, no, I didn’t mean made-for-TV movies. I meant real movies, the kind you see in theaters.”

“I don’t go to theaters, either.”

“Oh,” the woman says, sounding disappointed, and in a moment she turns away again and stares out the window at the autumn morning rushing by outside.

10:40 A.M.

“Well, I like it,” Dr. Morgan says, finally. “It looks good on paper.” He chews absently at the stem of his cheap pipe and puffs pungent grey smoke clouds that smell like roasting apples. “And a binomen should look good. It should sound good, rolling off the tongue.”

More than three months have passed since she found the Innsmouth fossil tucked away in Cabinet 34, and Lacey sits with Dr. Jasper Morgan in his tiny third-floor office: all the familiar, musty comforts of that small room with its high ceilings and ornate, molded plaster walls hidden behind solid oak shelves stuffed with dust-washed books and fossils and all the careful clutter of an academic’s life. A geologic map of Massachusetts is framed and hanging slightly askew. The rheumy hiss and clank from the radiator below the window, and if the glass wasn’t steamed over, she could see across the rooftops of Amherst, south to the low, autumn-stained hills beyond the town, the weathered slopes of the Holyoke Range rising blue-grey in the hazy distance.

Three months that hardly seem like three full weeks to her, days and nights, dreams and waking all become a blur of questions and hardly any answers, the fossil become her secret, shared only with Dr. Morgan, and Dr. Hanisak over in the zoology department. Hers and hers alone, until she could at least begin to get her bearings and a preliminary report on the specimen could be written. When she was ready and her paper had been peer-reviewed and accepted by *Nature*, Dr. Morgan arranged for the press conference at Yale, where she would sit in the shadow of Rudolph Zallinger’s *The Age of Reptiles* and Othniel Marsh’s dinosaurs and reveal the Innsmouth fossil to the whole wide world.

“I had to call it something,” she replies. “Seemed a shame not to have some fun with it. I have a feeling that I’m never going to find anything like this again.”

“Exactly,” Jasper Morgan says and leans back in his creaky wooden chair, takes the pipe from his mouth and stares intently into the smoldering bowl. Like a gypsy with her polished crystal ball, this old man with his glowing cinders. “‘Words,’” he says in the tone of voice he reserves for quoting anyone he holds in higher esteem than himself, “‘are in themselves among the most interesting objects of study, and the names of animals and plants are worthy of more consideration than biologists are inclined to give them.’’ He sighs and adds, “Unfortunately, no one seems to care very much about the aesthetics these days, no one but rusty old farts like me.”

He slides the manuscript back across his desk to Lacey, seventeen double-spaced pages held together with a green plastic paper clip. She nods once, reading over the text again silently to herself. Her eyes drift across his wispy red pencil marks: a missing comma here, there a spelling or date she should double-check.

“That’s not true,” Lacey says.

“What’s not true?”

“That no one but you cares anymore.”

“No? Well, maybe not. But, please, allow me the conceit.”

“Dr. Hanisak insists the name’s too fanciful. She said I should have called it something more descriptive. She suggested *Eocarpus*.”

“Of course she did. Hanisak has all the imagination of a stripped wing nut,” and the paleontologist slips his pipe back between his ivory-yellow teeth.

“*Grendelonyx innsmouthensis*,” Lacey whispers, the syllables across her tongue as smooth as good brandy.

“See? There you are. ‘Grendel’s claw from Innsmouth,’” Jasper Morgan mutters around his pipe. “What the hell could be more descriptive than that?”

Across campus, the steeple chimes begin to ring the hour – nine, ten, ten and three-quarters – later than Lacey had realized, and she frowns at her watch, not ready to leave the sanctuary of the office and his company.

“Shit. I’ll miss my train if I don’t hurry,” she says.

“Wish I were going with you. Wish I could be there to see their faces.”

“I know, but I’ll be fine. I’ll call as soon as I get to New Haven,” and she puts the manuscript back inside its folder and returns it to the battered black leather satchel that also holds her iBook with the PowerPoint presentation, the photographs and cladograms, her character matrix and

painstaking line drawings. Then Dr. Morgan smiles and shakes her hand, like they've only just met this morning, like it hasn't been years, and he sees her to the door. She carries the satchel in one hand and the sturdy cardboard box in the other. Last night, she transferred the fossil from its original box to this one, replaced the excelsior with cotton and foam-rubber padding. Her future lies in this box, her box of wonders.

"Knock 'em dead, kiddo," he says and hugs her, wraps her tight in the reassuring scents of his tobacco and aftershave lotion, and Lacey hugs him back, twice as hard.

"Don't you go losing that damned thing. That one's going to make you famous," he says and points at the cardboard box.

"Don't worry. It's not going to leave my sight, not even for a minute."

A few more words, encouragement and hurried last thoughts, and then Lacey walks alone down the long hallway past classrooms and tall display cabinets, doors to other offices, and she doesn't look back.

"I couldn't find it on the map," she said, watching the man's callused, oil-stained hands as he counted out her change, the five dollars and two nickels that were left of the twenty after he'd filled the Jeep's tank and replaced a windshield-wiper blade.

"Ain't on no maps," the man said. "Not no more. Ain't been on no maps since sometime way back in the thirties. Wasn't much left to put on a map after the Feds finished with the place."

"The Feds?" she asked. "What do they have to do with Innsmouth?" and the man stepped back from the car and eyed her more warily than before. A tall man with stooped shoulders and gooseberry-grey eyes, a nose that looked like it'd been broken more than once. He shrugged and shook his head.

"Hell, I don't know. You hear things, that's all. You hear all sorts of things. Most of it don't mean shit."

Lacey glanced at the digital clock on her dashboard, then up at the low purple-black clouds sailing by, the threat of more rain and nightfall not far behind it. Most of the day wasted on the drive from Amherst, a late start in a downpour, then a flat tire on Route 2, a flat tire *and* a flat spare. By the time she made Cape Ann, it was almost four o'clock.

"What business you got up at Innsmouth, anyhow?" the man asked suspiciously.

“I’m a scientist,” she said. “I’m looking for fossils.”

“Is that a fact? Well, ma’am, I never heard of anyone finding any sort of fossils around here.”

“That’s because the rocks are wrong for fossils. All the rocks around the Cape are igneous and – ”

“What’s that mean, *igneous*?” he interrupts, pronouncing the last word like it’s something that might bite if he’s not careful.

“It means they formed when molten rock – magma or lava – cooled down and solidified. Around here, most of the igneous rocks are plutonic, which means they solidified deep underground.”

“I never heard of no volcanoes around here.”

“No,” Lacey says. “There aren’t any volcanoes around here, not now. But there were a very long time ago.”

The man watched her silently for a moment, rubbed at his stubbly chin, as if trying to make up his mind whether or not to believe her.

“All these granite boulders around here, those are igneous rock. For fossils, you usually need sedimentary rocks, like sandstone or limestone.”

“Well, if that’s so, then what’re *you* doing looking for them out here?”

“That’s kind of a long story,” she said impatiently, tired of this distrustful man and the acrid stink of gasoline, just wanting to get back on the road again if he can’t, or won’t, tell her anything useful. “I wanted to see Innsmouth Harbor, that’s all.”

“Ain’t much left to see,” he said. “When I was a kid, back in the fifties, there was still some of the refinery standing, a few buildings left along the waterfront. My old man, he used to tell me ghost stories to keep me away from them. But someone or another tore all that shit down years ago. You take the road up to Ipswich and Plum Island, then head east. If you really wanna see for yourself, that is.”

“Thank you,” Lacey said, and she turned the key in the switch and wrestled the stick out of park.

“Any time at all,” the man replied. “You find anything interestin’, let me know.”

And, as she pulled away from the gas station, lightning flashed bright across the northern sky, somewhere off towards Plum Island and the cold Atlantic Ocean.

3:15 P.M.

The train slips through the shadow cast by the I-84 overpass, a brief ribbon of twilight from concrete and steel eclipse and then bright daylight again, and in a moment the Vermonter is pulling into the Hartford station. Lacey looks over her shoulder, trying not to *look* like she's looking, to see if they're still standing at the back of the car watching her – the priest and the oyster-haired crazy woman who gave her the envelope with the photograph and letter. They are, one on each side of the aisle like mismatched gargoyle bookends. It's been ten minutes or so since she first noticed them back there, the priest with his newspaper folded and tucked beneath one arm and the oyster-haired woman staring at the floor and mumbling quietly to herself. The priest makes eye contact with Lacey, and she turns away, looking quickly towards the front of the train again. A few of the passengers already on their feet, already retrieving bags and briefcases from overhead compartments, eager to be somewhere else, and the woman sitting next to Lacey asks if this is her stop.

"No," she says. "No, I'm going on to New Haven."

"Oh, do you have family there?" the woman asks. "Are you a student? My father went to Yale, but that was – "

"Will you watch my seat, please?" Lacey asks her, and the woman frowns at being interrupted, but nods her head yes.

"Thanks. I promise I won't be long. I just need to make a phone call."

Lacey gets up, and the oyster-haired woman stops mumbling to herself and takes a hesitant step forward. The priest lays one hand on her shoulder, and she halts, but glares at Lacey with her bulging eyes and holds up one palm like a crossing guard stopping traffic.

"I'll only be a moment," Lacey says.

"You can leave that here, too, if you like," the woman who smells like wintergreen and mothballs says, and Lacey realizes that she's still holding the box with the Innsmouth fossil.

"No. I'll be right back," Lacey tells her, gripping the box a little more tightly. Before the woman can say anything else, before the priest has a chance to change his mind and let the oyster-haired woman come after her, Lacey turns and pushes her way along the aisle towards the exit sign.

"Excuse me," she says, repeating the words like a prayer, a hasty mantra as she squeezes past impatient, unhelpful men and women. She accidentally steps on someone's foot, and he tells her to slow the fuck down, just wait her turn, what the fuck's *wrong* with her, anyway. Then

she's past the last of them and moving quickly down the steps, out of the train and standing safe on the wide and crowded platform. Glancing back at the tinted windows, she doesn't see the priest or the crazy woman who gave her the envelope. Lacey asks a porter pulling an empty luggage rack where she can find a pay phone, and he points to the terminal.

"Right through there," he says, "on your left, by the rest rooms." She thanks him and walks quickly across the platform towards the doors, the wide electric doors sliding open and closed, spitting some people out and swallowing others whole.

"Miss Morrow!" the priest shouts, his voice small above the muttering crowd. "Please, wait! You don't understand!"

But Lacey doesn't wait, only a few more feet to the wide terminal doors and never mind the damned pay phones. She can always call Jasper Morgan *after* she finds a security guard or a cop.

"Please!" the priest shouts, and the wide doors slide open again.

It ain't me *you got to be afraid of, Miss. Get that straight.*

"You'll have to come with us now," a tall, pale man in a black suit and black sunglasses says as he steps through the doors onto the platform. The sun shines like broken diamonds off the barrel of the pistol in his left hand and the badge in his right. Lacey turns to run, but there's already someone there to stop her, a black woman almost as tall as the pale man with the gun.

"You'll only make it worse on yourself," she says in a thick Caribbean accent, and Lacey looks back towards the train, desperately searching the crowd for the priest, and there's no sign of him anywhere.

After the gas station, Lacey followed Highway 1 south to Kent Corner and from there she took Haverhill Street to the 1A, gradually working her way south and east, winding towards Ipswich and the sea. The sky beaten black and blue by the storms and the day dissolving slowly into a premature North Shore night while lightning fingers flicked greedily across the land. At Ipswich, she asked directions again, this time from a girl working behind the counter of a convenience store. The girl had heard of Innsmouth, though she'd never seen the place for herself, had only picked up stories at school and from her parents – urban legends mostly, wild tales of witches and sea monsters and strange lights floating above the dunes. She sold Lacey a Diet Coke and a bag of Fritos and told her to take Argilla Road out of town and stay on it all the way down to the river.

“Be careful,” the girl said worriedly, and Lacey smiled and assured her that she would.

“Don’t worry about me,” she said. “I just want to have a quick look around.”

Twenty minutes later she reached the dead end of Argilla Road, a locked gate and chain-link fence crowned with loops of razor wire, stretching east and west as far as she could see. A rusty Army Corps of Engineers sign hung on the gate – NO TRESPASSING. VIOLATORS WILL BE PROSECUTED and THIS AREA PATROLLED BY ARMED GUARDS – DO NOT ENTER. She parked the Jeep in a sandy spot near the fence and sat for a few minutes staring at the sign, wondering how many years it had been there, how many decades since it was hung on the fence. Then she cut the engine and got out.

The wind smelled like rain and the sea, ozone and the fainter silty stink of the salt marshes, commingled smells of life and sex and death. She sat on the cooling hood of the car with a folded topographic map and finished the bag of Fritos. Below her the land dropped quickly away to stunted trees, billowing swells of goldenrod and spike grass, and a few stingy outcroppings of granite poking up here and there through the sand. The Manuxet River snaked along the bottom of the valley, wandering through thickets of bullrush and silverweed, tumbling over a few low falls on its way down to the mouth of Ipswich Bay.

But there was no indication that there had ever been a town of any sort here, certainly no evidence that this deserted stretch of coastline had once been the prosperous seaport of Innsmouth, with its mills and factories, a gold refinery and bustling waterfront, its history stretching back to the mid-17th century. So maybe she was in the wrong place after all. Maybe the ruins of Innsmouth lay somewhere farther east, or back towards Plum Island. Lacey watched two seagulls struggling against the wind, raucous grey-white smudges drifting in the low indigo sky. She glanced at the topo map and then northwest towards a point marked “Castle Hill,” but there was no castle there now, if indeed there ever had been, no buildings of any sort, only a place where the land rose up one last time before ending in a weathered string of steep granite cliffs.

She’d drawn a small red circle on the map just offshore, to indicate the coordinates written on the lid of the old box from Cabinet 34 – Latitude 42° 40” N, Longitude 70° 43” W – and Lacey scanned the horizon, wishing

she'd remembered her binoculars, hanging useless in her bedroom closet at home. But there was *something* out there, a thin, dark line a mile or more beyond the breakwater, barely visible above the stormy sea. Perhaps only her imagination – something she *needed* to see – or a trick of the fading light, or both. She glanced back down at the map. Not far from her red circle were contour lines indicating a high, narrow shoal hiding beneath the water, and the spot was labeled simply "Allen's Reef." If the tide were out and the ocean calm, maybe there would be more to see, perhaps an aplitic or pegmatitic dike cutting through the native granite, an ancient river of magma frozen, crystallized, scrubbed smooth by the waves.

"What do you think you'll find out there?" Jasper Morgan had asked her the day before. He'd come by her office with the results of a microfossil analysis of the sediment sample she'd scraped from the Innsmouth fossil. "There sure as hell aren't any Devonian rocks on Cape Ann," he'd said. "It's all Ordovician, and igneous to boot."

"I just want to see it," she'd replied, skimming the letter typed on Harvard stationary, describing the results of the analysis.

"So, what does it say?" Dr. Morgan had asked, but Lacey read all the way to the bottom of the page before answering him.

"The rock's siltstone, but we already knew that. The ostracods say Early Devonian, probably Lochkovian. And that snail's definitely *Loxonema*. So, there you go. Devonian rocks somewhere off Cape Ann."

"Damn," he'd whispered, grinning and scratching his head, and they'd spent the next half hour talking about the thing from Cabinet 34, more than a hundred million years older than anything with a forearm like that had a right to be. No getting around the fact that it looked a lot more like a hand, something built for grasping, than a forefoot.

"Maybe we ought to just put it *back* in that drawer," Jasper Morgan had said, shaking his head. "Do you have any idea what kind of shitstorm this thing's gonna cause?"

"I think maybe I'm beginning to."

"You might as well have found a goddamn cell phone buried in an Egyptian pyramid."

Thunder rumbles somewhere nearby, off towards Rowley, and a few cold drops of rain. Lacey glances down at the map and then out at the distant black line of Allen's Reef one last time. Such a long drive to find so little, the whole day wasted, the night and the time it would take her to drive

back to Amherst. Money spent on gasoline that could have gone for rent and groceries. She slid off the hood of the Jeep and was already folding the map closed when something moved out on the reef. She caught the briefest glimpse from the corner of one eye, the impression of something big and dark, scuttling on long legs across the rocks before slipping back into the water. There was another thunderclap, then, and this time lightning like God was taking pictures, but she didn't move, stared at the reef and the angry sea crashing over it.

"Just my imagination," she whispered. Or maybe it had been a bird, or a particularly high wave falling across the rocks, something perfectly familiar made strange by distance and shadow.

The thunder rolled away, and there were no sounds left but the wind blowing through the tall grass and the falls gurgling near the mouth of the Manuxet River. In an instant, the rain became a torrent, and her clothes and the map were soaked straight through before she could get back inside the Jeep.

3:25 P.M.

Handcuffs and a blindfold tied too tightly around her face before the man and woman who clearly aren't FBI agents shoved her into the back of a rust-green Ford van. And now she lies shivering on wet carpeting as they speed along streets that she can't see. The air around her is as cold as a late December night and thick with the gassy, sour-sweet stench of something dead, something that should have been buried a long, long time ago.

"I already *told* you why," the man in the black suit and sunglasses growls angrily, and Lacey thinks maybe there's fear in his voice, too. "She didn't *have* it, okay? And we couldn't risk going onto the train after it. Monalisa's people got to her first. I already fucking *told* you that."

Whatever is in the back of the van with her answers him in its ragged, drowning voice like her grandmother dying of pneumonia when Lacey was seven years old. There are almost words in there, broken bits and pieces of words, vowel shards and consonant shrapnel, and the woman with the Caribbean accent curses and mumbles something to herself in Haitian Creole.

"Please," Lacey begs them. "I don't know what you want. Tell me what the fuck you want, and I'll give it to you."

“You think so?” the woman asks. “You think it would be that easy now? After all this shit, and you just gonna hand it over, and we just gonna go away and leave you alone?

Merde…”

The van squeals around a corner without bothering to slow down, and Lacey is thrown sideways into something that feels like a pile of wet rags. She tries to roll away from it, but strong hands hold her fast, and icy fingers brush slowly across her throat, her chin, her lips. There’s skin like sandpaper and Jell-O, fingertips that may as well be icicles, and she bites at them, but her teeth close on nothing at all, a mouthful of frigid air that tastes like raw fish and spoiled vegetables.

“We had strict fucking instructions to *avoid* a confrontation,” the man says, and the car takes another corner, pitching Lacey free of the rag pile again.

“You just shut up and drive this damn car,” the woman says. “You gonna get us all killed. You gonna have the cops on us.”

“Then *you* better tell that slimy, half-breed motherfucker back there to shut the hell up and stop threatening me,” the man snarls at the woman. “I’m just about ready to say *fuck* you and him both. Pop a fucking cap in his skull and take my chances with the Order.”

The rag pile gurgles and then makes a hollow, gulping noise. Lacey thinks it’s laughing, as close as it can ever come to laughing, and she wonders how long it’s going to be before it touches her again, wonders if they’ll kill her first, and which would be worse. She presses her face against the soggy carpeting, eyes open but nothing there to see, rough fabric against her eyeballs, and she tries to wipe its touch from her skin. Nothing she’ll ever be able to scrub off, though, she knows that, something that’s stained straight through to her soul.

“Is it the fossil?” she asks. “Is this about the fossil?”

“Now you startin’ to use that big ol’ brain of yours, missy,” the woman says. “You tell us where it’s hid, who you gave it to, and maybe you gonna get to live just a little bit longer.”

“She ain’t gonna tell you jack shit,” the man sneers.

The rag pile makes a fluttering, anxious sound, and Lacey tries to sit up, but the van swerves and bounces over something, a pothole or a speed bump, a fucking old lady crossing the street for all she knows, and she tumbles over on her face again.

“It’s in the box,” she says, rolling onto her back, and she kicks out with her left foot and hits nothing but the metal side wall. The rag pile gurgles and sputters wildly, and so Lacey kicks the van again, harder than before. “Haven’t you even *opened* the goddamn box?”

“Bitch, ain’t *nothin’* we want in that box.,” the woman says. “You already handed it off to Monalisa, didn’t you?”

“Of course she fucking gave it to him. What the fuck else do you *think* she did with it?”

“I *told* you to shut up and drive.”

“*Fuck* you,” and then a car horn blares and everything dissolves into the banshee wail of squealing brakes, tires burning themselves down to naked, steelbelt bones, the impact hardly half a heartbeat later, and Lacey is thrown backwards into the gurgling rag pile. *Something soft to cushion the blow, at least,* she thinks, wondering if she’s dead already and just hasn’t figured it all out yet, and the man in the sunglasses screams like a woman.

There’s light, a flood of clean, warm sunlight across her face before the gunfire – three shots – *blam, blam, blam.* The rag pile abruptly stops gurgling, and someone takes her by the arm, someone pulling her out of the van, out of hell and back into the world again.

“I can’t see,” she says, and the blindfold falls away to leave her squinting and blinking at the rough brick walls of an alleyway, a sagging fire escape. There’s the heady the stink of a garbage dumpster, but even that smells good after the van.

“Wow,” the old man says, the grinning scarecrow of an old man in a blue fedora and a shiny gabardine suit, blue bow tie to match his hat. “I saw someone do that in a movie once. I never imagined it would actually work.”

There’s a huge revolver clutched in his bony right hand, the blindfold dangling from the fingers of his left, and his violet-grey eyes sparkle like amethysts and spring water.

“Professor Solomon Monalisa, at your service,” he says, letting the blindfold fall to the ground and he holds one twig-thin hand out to Lacey. “You had us all worried, Miss Morrow. You shouldn’t have run like that.”

Lacey stares at his outstretched hand. There are sirens now.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I forgot about the handcuffs. I’m afraid we’ll have to attend to those elsewhere, though. I don’t think we should be here when the police show up and start asking questions, do you?”

“No,” she says, and the old man takes her arm again and starts to lead her away from the wrecked van.

“Wait. The box,” she says and tries to turn around, but he stops her and puts a hand across her eyes.

“What’s back there, Miss Morrow, you don’t want to see it.”

“They have the box. The Innsmouth fossil – ”

“*I* have the fossil,” he says. “And it’s quite safe, I assure you. Come now, Miss Morrow. We don’t have much time.”

He leads her away from the van, down the long, narrow alley. There’s a door back there, a tall wooden door with peeling red paint, and he opens it with a silver key.

Excerpt from *New American Monsters: More Than Myth?* by Gerald Durrell (Hill and Wang, New York, 1959):

… which is certainly enough to make us pause and wonder about the possibility of a connection between at least some of these sightings and the celluloid fantasies being churned out by Hollywood film-makers. If we insist upon objectivity and are willing to entertain the notion of unknown animals, we must also, it seems, be equally willing to entertain the possibility that a few of these beasts may exist as much in the realm of the psychologist as that of the biologist. I can think of no better example of what I mean than the strange and frightening reports from Massachusetts that preceded the release of *The Creature From the Black Lagoon* five years ago.

As first reported in the *Ipswich Chronicle*, March 20th, 1954, there was a flurry of sightings, from Gloucester north to Newburyport, of one or more scaly man-like amphibians, monstrous things that menaced boaters and were blamed for the death of at least one swimmer. On the evening of March 19th, Mrs. Cordelia Eliot of Rowley was walking along the coast near the Annisquam Harbor Lighthouse, when she saw what she later described as a “horrible fishman” paddling about just off shore. She claims to have watched it for half an hour, until the sun set and she lost sight of the creature. Four days later, there was another sighting by two fishermen near the mouth of the Annisquam River, of a “frogman with bulging red eyes and scaly greenish-black skin” wading through the shallows. When one of the men fired a shotgun at it (I haven’t yet concluded if the men routinely carried firearms on fishing trips), it slipped quietly away into deeper water.

But the lion's share of the sightings that spring seem to have occurred in the vicinity of the "ghost town" of Innsmouth, at the mouth of the Castle Neck River (previously known by its Agawam Indian name, *Manuxet*, a name which still persists among local old-timers). Most of these encounters are merely brief glimpses of scaly man-like creatures, usually seen from a considerable distance, either swimming near the mouth of the river or walking along its muddy banks at low tide. But one remarkable, and disturbing, account, reported by numerous local papers, involves the death of a nine-year-old boy named Lester Sargent, who drowned while swimming with friends below a small waterfall on the lower Castle Neck River. His companions reported that the boy began screaming, and immediately a great amount of blood was visible in the water. There were attempts to reach the swimmer, but the would-be rescuers were driven back by "a monster with blood-red eyes and sharp teeth." The boy finally disappeared beneath the surface and his mutilated and badly decomposed body turned up a week later on Crane Beach, a considerable distance from the falls where he disappeared. The Essex County coroner listed the cause of death as shark attack.

"I've seen plenty of sharks," Harold Mowry, one of the swimmers, told reporters. "This wasn't a shark, I swear. It had hands, with great long claws, and it dragged Lester right down and drowned him."

Another notable sighting occurred along the old Argilla Road near Ipswich on April 2. The Rev. Henry Waite and his wife, Elizabeth, both avid bird watchers, claimed to have observed a "monster" strolling along the east bank of the Castle Neck River for more than an hour, before it dove into the river and vanished in a swirl of bubbles. Mrs. Waite described it as "tall and dark, and it walked a little hunched over. Through the binoculars, we could see its face quite plainly. It did *have* a face, you know, with protruding eyes like a fish, and gills. At one point it turned and seemed to be watching us. I admit I was afraid and asked Henry if we shouldn't go for the police. Have you ever seen that *Monster from the Black Lagoon* [sic] movie? Well, that's what it looked like."

The last of the sightings were made in early May and no further records of amphibious man-monsters near Cape Ann or Ipswich Bay are available. One report of April 27th claimed that a group of school children had, in fact, found the monster dead, but their discovery later proved to be nothing but the badly decomposed carcass of a basking shark. It is

impossible, I think, not to draw connections with the release of the Universal-International horror flick on March 5th. The old bugaboo of “mass hysteria” raises its shaggy head once more.

10.23 A.M.

She’s late for her meeting with Jasper before the drive to the train station, and Lacey rushes upstairs from the collections, is already halfway across the central rotunda of the Pratt Museum’s exhibit hall when Dr. Mary Hanisak calls out her name. Lacey stops and stands in the skeletal shadows of the mammoth and mastodon, the stuffed Indian elephant, and Dr. Hanisak is walking quickly towards her, carrying the cardboard box with the Innsmouth fossil inside.

“Can you believe you almost forgot this thing?” she asks. “That would have been pretty embarrassing, don’t you think?.”

Lacey laughs a little too loudly, her voice echoing in the museum. “Yeah,” she says. “It would have,” and she takes the box from the woman, chubby little Dr. Hanisak like a storybook gnome, Dr. Hanisak whose specialty is the evolution of rodent teeth. The box is wrapped tight with packing tape, so there’s no danger of its coming open on the train.

“Then you’re all set now?”

“Ready as I’m ever going to be.”

“And you’re *certain* you want to do this? I mean, it’s awfully high-profile. I expect you’ll be in newspapers all over the world when the reporters get a look at what’s in that box. You might even be on CNN. Aren’t you scared?”

Lacey stares for a moment at the dusty bones of a saber-tooth cat mounted near the mammoth’s feet. “You bet,” she says. “I’m terrified. But maybe it’ll at least bring in some new funding for the museum. We could sure use it.”

“Perhaps,” Dr. Hanisak replies uncertainly, and she folds her hands and stares at the box. “You never can tell how these things will turn out, in the end.”

“I suppose not,” Lacey says, and then she looks at her watch and thanks Dr. Hanisak again. “I really have to get going,” she says and leaves the woman standing alone with the skeletons.

Excerpt from *Famous Film Monsters and the Men Who Made Them* by Ben Browning (The Citadel Press, Secaucus, NJ, 1972):

Certainly there are several interesting stories floating about Hollywood regarding producer William Alland's inspiration for the story. The one most often repeated, it would seem, recounts how Alland heard a tale during a dinner party at Orson Welles' home regarding an ancient race of "fish-men" called the *dhaghon* inhabiting remote portions of the Amazon River. Local natives believed these creatures rose from the depths once a year, after floods, and abducted virgins. Naturally, the person telling the story is said to have sworn to its veracity. Another, less plausible, source of inspiration may have been a tradition in some parts of Massachusetts, in and around Gloucester, of humanoid sea monsters said to haunt a particularly treacherous stretch of coast near Ipswich Bay, known appropriately enough as the "Devil's Reef." Rumor has it Alland knew of these legends, but decided to change the story's setting from maritime New England to the Amazon because he preferred a more exotic and primeval locale. At any rate, one or another of these "fish stories" might have stuck with him and become the germ for the project he eventually pitched and sold to Universal.

3:47 P.M.

She goes through the peeling red door, and she follows the old man down long hallways dimly lit by bare incandescent bulbs, wallpaper shreds, led upstairs and downstairs, and finally, a door he opens with another silver key. A steel fire door painted all the uncountable shades of dried gore and butcheries, and it swings open slow on creaking hinges, pours the heavy scents of frigid air and formaldehyde at their feet. There's light in there, crimson light. Lacey looks at Dr. Solomon Monalisa, and he's smiling a doubtful, furtive smile.

"What am I going to see in there?"

"That's a matter of opinion," he says and holds one skinny arm out like a theater usher leading her to an empty seat.

"I asked you a simple question. All I wanted was a simple answer."

"Yes, but there are no *simple* answers, are there?"

"What's waiting for me in there?"

"All things are but mirrors, Miss Morrow. They reflect our deepest preconceptions, our most cherished prejudices."

“Never fucking mind,” she says and steps quickly across the threshold into a room as cold as the back of the Ford van. The room is almost empty, high concrete walls and a concrete ceiling far overhead, banks of darkroom red lights dangling on chains, and the tank, sitting alone in the center of it all.

“You’re a very lucky woman,” Dr. Monalisa says, and the steel door clicks shut behind her. “Have you any idea, my dear, how few scientists have had this privilege? Why, I could count them all on my left hand.”

The tank is at least seven feet tall, sturdy aquarium glass held together with strips of rusted iron, filled with murky preservative gone bloody beneath the lights, and Lacey stares at the thing floating lifeless behind the glass.

“What do *you* see, Miss Morrow?”

“My god,” she whispers and takes another step towards the tank.

“Now that’s a curious answer.”

Neither man nor fish, neither fish nor amphibian, long legs and longer arms, and its bald, misshapen skull is turned upwards, as if those blind white eyes are gazing longingly towards Heaven. Solomon Monalisa rattles his keys and slips the handcuffs from her aching wrists.

“*Grendelonyx innsmouthensis – that’s* what I thought you’d see, Miss Morrow. Grendel’s claw.”

“But it’s impossible,” she whispers.

“Quite completely,” Dr. Solomon Monalisa says. “It is entirely, unquestionably impossible.”

“Is it real?”

“Yes, of course it’s real. Why would I show it to you otherwise?”

Lacey nods her head and crosses the room to stand beside the tank, places one hand flat against the glass. She’s surprised that it isn’t cold to the touch. The creature inside looks pale and soft, but she knows that’s only the work of time and the caustic preserving chemicals.

“It got tangled in a fishing net, dragged kicking into the light of day,” the old man says. His footsteps are very loud in the concrete room. “Way back in November ’29, not too long after the Navy finished up with Innsmouth. I suspect it was wounded by the torpedoes,” and he points to a deep gash near the thing’s groin. “They kept it in a basement at the university in Arkham for a time, and then it went to Washington, the Smithsonian. They moved it here right after the war.”

She almost asks him which war, and who "they" are, but she doubts he would tell her, not the truth, anyway. She can't take her eyes off the beautiful, terrible, impossible creature in the tank – its splayed hands, the bony webbing between its fingers, the recurved, piercing claws. "Why are you showing me this?" she finally asks, instead.

"It seemed a shame not to," he replies, his smile fading now, and he also touches the aquarium glass. "There are so few who can truly comprehend the…" and he pauses, furrowing his brow. "The *wonder* – yes, that's what I mean, the wonder of it all."

"You said you have the fossil."

"Oh, yes. We do. I do. Dr. Hanisak was kind enough to switch the boxes for us last night, while you were finishing up at the museum."

"Dr. Hanisak – "

"Shhhhhh," and Monalisa holds a wrinkled index finger to his lips. "Let's not ask *too* many questions, dear. I assure you, the fossil is safe and sound. I'll give it back to you very soon. Ah, and we have all your things from the train. You'll be wanting those back as well, I should imagine. But I wanted you to see our friend here first, before you see the film."

"What film?" she asks, remembering the photograph from the manila envelope, the letter, the nosy woman asking her if she liked old monster movies.

"What odd sort of childhood did you have, Miss Morrow? Weren't you allowed to watch television? Have you truly never seen it?"

"My mother didn't like us watching television," Lacey says. "We didn't even own a TV set. She bought us books, instead. I've never cared much for movies. I don't know what you're talking about."

"Then that may be the most remarkable part of it all. You may be the only adult in America who's never seen *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*," and he chuckles softly to himself.

"I've heard of it."

"I should certainly hope so."

At last she turns away from the dead thing floating in the tank and looks into Dr. Solomon Monalisa's sparkling eyes. "You're not going to kill me?" she asks him.

"Why would I have gone to all the trouble to save you from those thugs back there if I only wanted you dead? They'd surely have seen to that for me, once they figured out you didn't have the fossil any longer."

“I don’t understand any of this,” Lacey says and realizes that she’s started to cry.

“No,” he says. “But you weren’t meant to. No one was. It’s a secret.”

“What about my work?”

“Your article has been withdrawn from *Nature*. And Dr. Hanisak was good enough to cancel the press conference at the Peabody Museum.”

“And now I’m just supposed to pretend I never saw any of this?”

“No, certainly not. You’re just supposed to keep it to yourself.”

“It doesn’t make any sense. Why don’t you just destroy the fossil? Why don’t you destroy *this* thing?” and she slaps the glass hard with the palm of her hand. “If it’s a goddamn secret, if no one’s supposed to know, why don’t you get rid of it all?”

“Could *you* destroy these things?” the old man asks her. “No, I didn’t think so. Haven’t you taken a oath, of sorts, to search for answers, even when the answers are uncomfortable, even when they’re *impossible*? Well, you see, dear, so have I.”

“It was just lying there in the cabinet. Anyone could have found it. Anyone at all.”

“Indeed. The fossil has been missing for decades. We have no idea how it ever made its way to Amherst. But you will care for it now, yes?”

She doesn’t answer him, because she doesn’t want to say the words out loud, stares instead through her tears at the creature in the tank.

“Yes, I thought you would. You have an uncommon strength. Come along, Miss Morrow. We should be going now,” he says and takes her hand. “The picture will be starting soon.”

For David J. Schow, Keeper of the Black Lagoon

From Cabinet 34, Drawer 6

Most times, a story comes to me as an image, a jumble of images, a character, a name, fragments, or a confetti of words. I don’t think in plots. I don’t have clever ideas. This story is an exception to that rule. *Grendelonyx*, if only it was the first half of a genuine binomen. A Late Jurassic English ichthyosaur was christened *Grendelius*, but the name has since been ruled a

junior synonym of *Brachypterygius*. Sorry. I start talking paleontology, I will prattle on and on. But I did find Innsmouth…

Andromeda Among the Stones

“I cannot think of the deep sea without shuddering…”

H. P. Lovecraft

October 1914

“Is she really and truly dead, Father?” the girl asked, and Machen Dandridge, already an old man at fifty-one, looked up at the low buttermilk sky again and closed the black book clutched in his hands. He’d carved the tall headstone himself, the marker for his wife’s grave there by the relentless Pacific, black shale obelisk with its hasty death’s-head. His daughter stepped gingerly around the raw earth and pressed her fingers against the monument.

“Why did you not give her to the sea?” she asked. “She always wanted to go down to the sea at the end. She often told me so.”

“I’ve given her back to the earth, instead,” Machen told her and rubbed at his eyes. The cold sunlight through thin clouds was enough to make his head ache, his daughter’s voice like thunder, and he shut his aching eyes for a moment. Just a little comfort in the almost blackness trapped behind his lids, parchment skin too insubstantial to bring the balm of genuine darkness, void to match the shades of his soul, and Machen whispered one of the prayers from the heavy black book and then looked at the grave again.

“Well, that’s what she always told me,” the girl said again, running her fingertips across the rough-hewn stone.

“Things changed at the end, child. The sea wouldn’t have taken her. I had to give her back to the earth.”

“She said it was a sacrilege, planting people in the ground like wheat, like kernels of corn.”

“She did?” He glanced anxiously over his left shoulder, looking back across the waves the wind was making in the high and yellow-brown grass, the narrow trail leading back down to the tall and brooding house that he’d

built for his wife twenty-four years ago, back towards the cliffs and the place where the sea and sky blurred seamlessly together.

"Yes, she did. She said only barbarians and heathens stick their dead in the ground like turnips."

"I had no choice," Machen replied, wondering if that was exactly the truth or only something he'd like to believe. "The sea wouldn't take her, and I couldn't bring myself to burn her."

"Only heathens burn their dead," his daughter said disapprovingly and leaned close to the obelisk, setting her ear against the charcoal shale.

"Do you hear anything?"

"No, Father. Of course not. She's dead. You just said so."

"Yes," Machen whispered. "She is." And the wind whipping across the hillside made a hungry, waiting sound that told him it was time for them to head back to the house.

This is where I stand, at the bottom gate, and I hold the key to the abyss…

"But it's better that way," the girl said, her ear still pressed tight against the obelisk. "She couldn't stand the pain any longer. It was cutting her up inside."

"She told you that?"

"She didn't have to tell me that. I saw it in her eyes."

The ebony key to the first day and the last, the key to the moment when the stars wink out, one by one, and the sea heaves its rotting belly at the empty, sagging sky.

"You're only a child," he said. "You shouldn't have had to see such things. Not yet."

"It can't very well be helped now," she answered and stepped away from her mother's grave, one hand cupping her ear like maybe it had begun to hurt. "You know that, old man."

"I do," and he almost said her name then, Meredith, his mother's name, but the wind was too close, the listening wind and the salt-and-semen stink of the breakers crashing against the cliffs. "But I can wish it were otherwise."

"If wishes were horses, beggars would ride."

And Machen watched silently as Meredith Dandridge knelt in the grass and placed her handful of wilting wildflowers on the freshly turned soil. If it were spring instead of autumn, he thought, there would be dandelions and

poppies. If it were spring instead of autumn, the woman wrapped in a quilt and nailed up inside a pine-board casket would still be breathing. If it were spring, they would not be alone now, him and his daughter at the edge of the world. The wind teased the girl's long yellow hair, and the sun glittered dimly in her warm green eyes.

The key I have accepted full in the knowledge of its weight.

"Remember me," Meredith whispered, either to her dead mother or something else, and he didn't ask which.

"We should be heading back now," he said and glanced over his shoulder again.

"So soon? Is that all you're going to read from the book? Is that all of it?"

"Yes, that's all of it, for now," though there would be more, later, when the harvest moon swelled orange-red and bloated and hung itself in the wide California night. When the odd, mute women came to dance, then there would be other words to say, to keep his wife in the ground and the gate shut for at least another year.

The weight that is the weight of all salvation, the weight that holds the line against the last, unending night.

"It's better this way," his daughter said again, standing up, brushing the dirt off her stockings, from the hem of her black dress. "There was so little left of her."

"Don't talk of that here," Machen replied, more sternly than he'd intended. But Meredith didn't seem to have noticed or, if she'd noticed, not to have minded the tone of her father's voice.

"I will remember her the way she was before, when she was still beautiful."

"That's what she would want," he said and took his daughter's hand. "That's the way I'll remember her, as well," but he knew that was a lie, as false as any lie any living man ever uttered. He knew that he would always see his wife as the writhing, twisted thing she'd become at the last, the way she was after the gates were almost thrown open, and she placed herself on the threshold.

The frozen weight of the sea, the burning weight of starlight and my final breath. I hold the line. I hold the ebony key against the last day of all.

And Machen Dandridge turned his back on his wife's grave and led his daughter down the dirt and gravel path, back to the house waiting for them

like a curse.

November 1914

Meredith Dandridge lay very still in her big bed, her big room with its high ceiling and no pictures hung on the walls, and she listened to the tireless sea slamming itself against the rocks. The sea there to take the entire world apart one gritty speck at a time, the sea that was here first and would be here long after the continents had finally been weathered down to so much slime and sand. She knew this because her father had read to her from his heavy black book, the book that had no name, the book that she couldn't ever read for herself or the demons would come for her in the night. And she knew, too, because of the books he had *given* her, her books – *Atlantis: The Antediluvian World*, *The World Before the Deluge*, and *Atlantis and Lost Lemuria*. Everything above the waves on borrowed time, her father had said again and again, waiting for the day when the sea rose once more and drowned the land beneath its smothering, salty bosom, and the highest mountains and deepest valleys will become a playground for sea serpents and octopuses and schools of herring. Forests to become Poseidon's orchards, her father said, though she knew Poseidon wasn't the true name of the god-thing at the bottom of the ocean, just a name some dead man gave it thousands of years ago.

"Should I read you a story tonight, Merry?" her dead mother asked, sitting right there in the chair beside the bed. She smelled like fish and mud, even though they'd buried her in the dry ground at the top of the hill behind the house. Meredith didn't look at her, because she'd spent so much time already trying to remember her mother's face the way it was *before* and didn't want to see the ruined face the ghost was wearing like a mask. As bad as the face her brother now wore, worse than that, and Meredith shrugged and pushed the blankets back a little.

"If you can't sleep, it might help," her mother said with a voice like kelp stalks swaying slowly in deep water.

"It might," Meredith replied, staring at a place where the wallpaper had begun to peel free of one of the walls, wishing there were a candle in the room or an oil lamp so the ghost would leave her alone. "And it might not."

"I could read to you from Hans Christian Andersen, or one of Grimm's tales," her mother sighed. "'The Little Mermaid' or 'The Fisherman and his

Wife’?”

“You could tell me what it’s like in Hell,” the girl replied.

“Dear, I don’t have to tell you that,” her ghost mother whispered, her voice gone suddenly regretful and sad. “I know I don’t have to ever tell you that.”

“There might be different hells,” Meredith said. “This one, and the one father sent you away to, and the one Avery is lost inside. No one ever said there could only be one, did they? Maybe it has many regions. A hell for the dead Prussian soldiers and another for the French, a hell for Christians and another for the Jews. And maybe another for all the pagans.”

“Your father didn’t send me anywhere, child. I crossed the threshold of my own accord.”

“So I would be alone in *this* hell.”

The ghost clicked its sharp teeth together, and Meredith could hear the anemone tendrils between its iridescent fish eyes quickly withdrawing into the hollow places in her mother’s decaying skull.

“I could read you a poem,” her mother said hopefully. “I could sing you a song.”

“It isn’t all fire and brimstone, is it? Not the region of hell where you are? It’s blacker than night and cold as ice, isn’t it, mother?”

“Did he think it would save me to put me in the earth? Does the old fool think it will bring me back across, like Persephone?”

Too many questions, hers and her mother’s, and for a moment Meredith Dandridge didn’t answer the ghost, kept her eyes on the shadowy wallpaper strips, the pinstripe wall, wishing the sun would rise and pour warm and gold as honey through the drapes.

“I crossed the threshold of my *own* accord,” the ghost said again, and Meredith wondered if it thought she didn’t hear the first time. Or maybe it was something her mother needed to believe and might stop believing if she stopped repeating it. “Someone had to do it.”

“It didn’t have to be you.”

The wind whistled wild and shrill around the eaves of the house, invisible lips pressed to a vast, invisible instrument, and Meredith shivered and pulled the covers up to her chin again.

“There was no one else. It wouldn’t take your brother. The one who wields the key cannot be a man. You know that, Merry. Avery knew that, too.”

“There are other women,” Meredith said, speaking through gritted teeth, not wanting to start crying but the tears already hot in her eyes. “It could have been someone else. It didn’t have to be my mother.”

“Some other child’s mother, then?” the ghost asked. “Some other mother’s daughter?”

“Go back to your hell,” Meredith said, still looking at the wall, spitting out the words like poison. “Go back to your hole in the ground and tell your fairy tales to the worms. Tell them ‘The Fisherman and his Wife.’”

“You have to be strong now, Merry. You have to listen to your father, and you have to be ready. I wasn’t strong enough.”

And finally she did turn to face her mother, what was left of her mother’s face, the scuttling things nesting in her tangled hair, the silver scales and barnacles, the stinging anemone crown, and Meredith Dandridge didn’t flinch or look away.

“One day,” she said, “I’ll take that damned black book of his, and I’ll toss it into the stove. I’ll take it, mother, and toss it into the hearth, and then they can come out of the sea and drag us both away.”

Her mother cried out and came apart like a breaking wave against the shingle, water poured from the tin pail that had given it shape, her flesh gone suddenly as clear and shimmering as glass, before she drained away and leaked through the cracks between the floorboards. The girl reached out and dipped her fingers into the shallow pool left behind in the wicker seat of the chair. The water was cold and smelled unclean. And then she lay awake until dawn, listening to the ocean, to all the unthinking noises a house makes in the small hours of a night.

May 1914

Avery Dandridge had his father’s eyes, but someone else’s soul to peer out through them, and to his sister he was hope that there might be a life somewhere beyond the rambling house beside the sea. Five years her senior, he’d gone away to school in San Francisco for a while, almost a year, because their mother wished him to. But there had been an incident, and he was sent home again, transgressions only spoken of in whispers and nothing anyone ever bothered to explain to Meredith, but that was fine with her. She only cared that he was back, and she was that much less alone.

“Tell me about the earthquake,” she said to him, one day not long after he’d returned, the two of them strolling together along the narrow beach

below the cliffs, sand the color of coal dust, noisy gulls and driftwood like titan bones washed in by the tide. “Tell me all about the fire.”

“The earthquake? Merry, that was eight years ago. You were still just a baby, that was such long time ago,” and then he picked up a shell and turned it over in his hand, brushing away some of the dark sand stuck to it. “People don’t like to talk about the earthquake anymore. I never heard them say much about it.”

“Oh,” she said, not sure what to say next but still full of questions. “Father says it was a sign, a sign from – ”

“Maybe you shouldn’t believe everything he says, Merry. It was an earthquake.” And she felt a thrill then, like a tiny jolt of electricity rising up her spine and spreading out across her scalp, that anyone, much less Avery, would question their father and suggest she do likewise.

“Have you stopped believing in the signs?” she asked, breathless. “Is that what you learned in school?”

“I didn’t learn much of anything important in school,” he replied and showed her the shell in his palm. Hardly as big around as a nickel, but peaked in the center like a Chinaman’s hat, radial lines of chestnut brown. “It’s pretty,” she said as he placed it in her palm.

“What’s it called?”

“It’s a limpet,” he replied, because Avery knew all about shells and fish and the fossils in the cliffs, things he’d learned from their father’s books and not from school. “It’s a shield limpet. The jackmackerel carry them into battle when they fight the eels.”

Meredith laughed out loud at that last part, and he laughed, too, then sat down on a rock at the edge of a wide tide pool. She stood there beside him, still inspecting the shell in her hand, turning it over and over again. The concave underside of the limpet was smoother than silk and would be white if not for the faintest iridescent hint of blue.

“That’s not true,” she said. “Everyone knows the jackmackerel and the eels are friends.”

“Sure they are,” Avery said. “Everyone knows that.” But he was staring out to sea now and didn’t turn to look at her. In a moment, she slipped the shell into a pocket of her sweater and sat down on the rock next to him.

“Do you see something out there?” she asked, and he nodded his head, but didn’t speak. The wind rushed cold and damp across the beach and

painted ripples on the surface of the pool at their feet. The wind and the waves seemed louder than usual, and Meredith wondered if that meant a storm was coming.

“Not a storm,” Avery said, and that didn’t surprise her because he often knew what she was thinking before she said it. “A war’s coming, Merry.”

“Oh yes, the jackmackerel and the eels,” Merry laughed and squinted towards the horizon, trying to see whatever it was that had attracted her brother’s attention. “The squid and the mussels.”

“Don’t be silly. Everyone knows that the squid and the mussels are great friends,” and that made her laugh again. But Avery didn’t laugh, looked away from the sea and stared down instead at the scuffed toes of his boots dangling a few inches above the water.

“There’s never been a war like the one that’s coming,” he said after a while. “All the nations of the earth at each other’s throats, Merry, and when we’re done with all the killing, no one will be left to stand against the sea.”

She took a very deep breath, the clean, salty air to clear her head, and began to pick at a barnacle on the rock.

“If that were true,” she said, “Father would have told us. He would have shown us the signs.”

“He doesn’t see them. He doesn’t dream the way I do.”

“But you told him?”

“I tried. But he thinks it’s something they put in my head at school. He thinks it’s some kind of trick to make him look away.”

Merry stopped picking at the barnacle, because it was making her fingers sore and they’d be bleeding soon if she kept it up. She decided it was better to watch the things trapped in the tide pool, the little garden stranded there until the sea came back to claim it. Periwinkle snails and hermit crabs wearing stolen shells, crimson starfish and starfish the shape and color of sunflowers.

“He thinks they’re using me to make him look the other way, to catch him off his guard,” Avery whispered, his voice almost lost in the rising wind. “He thinks I’m being set against him.”

“Avery, I don’t believe Father would say that about you.”

“He didn’t have to say it,” and her brother’s dark and shining eyes gazed out at the sea and sky again.

“We should be heading back soon, shouldn’t we? The tide will be coming in before long,” Meredith said, noticing how much higher up the beach the waves were reaching than the last time she’d looked. Another half hour and the insatiable ocean would be battering itself against the rough shale cliffs at their backs.

“‘Wave after wave, each mightier than the last,’” Avery whispered, closing his eyes tight, and the words coming from his pale, thin lips sounded like someone else, someone old and tired that Meredith had never loved. “‘Till last, a ninth one, gathering half the deep and full of voices, slowly rose and plunged roaring, and all the wave was in a flame – ’”

“What’s that?” she asked, interrupting because she didn’t want to hear anymore. “Is it from Father’s book?”

“No, it’s not,” he replied, sounding more like himself again, more like her brother. He opened his eyes, and a tear rolled slowly down his wind-chapped cheek. ”It’s just something they taught me at school.”

“How can a wave be in flame? Is it supposed to be a riddle?” she asked, and he shook his head.

“No,” he said and wiped at his face with his hands. “It’s nothing at all, just a silly bit of poetry they made us memorize. School is full of silly poetry.”

“Is that why you came home?”

“We ought to start back,” he said, glancing quickly over his shoulder at the high cliffs, the steep trail leading back up towards the house. “Can’t have the tide catching us with our trousers down, now can we?”

“I don’t even wear trousers,” Merry said glumly, still busy thinking about that ninth wave, the fire and the water. Avery put an arm around her and held her close to him for a moment while the advancing sea dragged itself eagerly back and forth across the moss-scabbed rocks.

January 1915

Meredith sat alone on the floor at the end of the hallway, the narrow hall connecting the foyer to the kitchen and a bathroom, and then farther along, leading all the way back to the very rear of the house and this tall door that was always locked. The tarnished brass key always hung on its ring upon her father’s belt. She pressed her ear against the wood and strained to hear anything at all. The wood was damp and very cold, and the smell of saltwater and mildew seeped freely through the space between the

bottom of the door and the floor, between the door and the jamb. Once-solid redwood that had long since begun to rot from the continual moisture, the ocean's corrosive breath to rust the hinges so the door cried out like a stepped-on cat every time it was opened or closed. Even as a very small child, Meredith had feared this door, even in the days before she'd started to understand what lay in the deep place beneath her father's house.

Outside, the icy winter wind howled, and she shivered and pulled her grey wool shawl tighter about her shoulders; the very last thing her mother had made for her, that shawl. Almost as much hatred in Merry for the wind as for the sea, but at least it smothered the awful thumps and moans that came, day and night, from the attic room where her father had locked Avery away in June.

"There are breaches between the worlds, Merry," Avery had said, a few days before he picked the lock on the hallway door with the sharpened tip-end of a buttonhook and went down to the deep place by himself. "Rifts, fractures, ruptures. If they can't be closed, they have to be guarded against the things on the other side that don't belong here."

"Father says it's a portal," she'd replied, closing the book she'd been reading, a dusty, dog-eared copy of Franz Unger's *Primitive World*.

Her brother had laughed a dry, humorless laugh and shaken his head, nervously watching the fading day through the parlor windows. "Portals are built on purpose, to be used. These things are accidents, at best, casualties of happenstance, tears in space when one world passes much too near another."

"Well, that's not what Father says."

"Read your book, Merry. One day you'll understand. One day soon, when you're not a child anymore, and he loses his hold on you."

And she'd frowned, sighed, and opened her book again, opening it at random to one of the strangely melancholy lithographs – *The Period of the Muschelkalk [Middle Trias]*. A violent seascape, and in the foreground a reef jutted above the waves, crowded with algae-draped driftwood branches and the shells of stranded mollusca and crinoidea. There was something like a crocodile, that the author called *Nothosaurus giganteus,* clinging to the reef so it wouldn't be swept back into the storm-tossed depths. Overhead, the night sky was a turbulent mass of clouds with the small, white moon, full or near enough to full, peeking through to illuminate the ancient scene.

“You mean planets?” she’d asked Avery. “You mean moons and stars?”

“No, I mean *worlds*. Now, read your book, and don’t ask so many questions.”

Meredith thought she heard creaking wood, her father’s heavy footsteps, the dry ruffling of cloth rubbing against cloth, and she stood quickly, not wanting to be caught listening at the door again, was still busy straightening her rumpled dress when she realized that he was standing there in the hall behind her, instead. Her mistake, thinking he’d gone to the deep place, when he was somewhere else all along, in his library or the attic room with Avery or outside braving the cold to visit her mother’s grave on the hill.

“What are you doing, child?” he asked her gruffly and tugged at his beard. There were streaks of silver-grey that weren’t there only a couple of months before, scars from the night they lost her mother, his wife, the night the demons tried to squeeze in through the tear, and Ellen Dandridge had tried to block their way. His face grown years older in the space of weeks, dark crescents beneath his eyes like bruises and deep creases in his forehead. He brushed his daughter’s blonde hair from her eyes.

“Would it have been different, if you’d believed Avery from the start?”

For a moment he didn’t reply, and his silence, his face set as hard and perfectly unreadable as stone, made her want to strike him, made her wish she could kick open the rotting, sea-damp door and hurl him screaming down the stairs to whatever was waiting for them both in the deep place.

“I don’t know, Meredith. But I had to trust the book, and I had to believe the signs in the heavens.”

“You were too arrogant, old man. You almost gave away the whole wide world because you couldn’t admit you might be wrong.”

“You should be thankful that your mother can’t hear you, young lady, using that tone of voice with your own father.”

Meredith turned and looked at the tall, rotten door again, the symbols drawn on the wood in whitewash and blood.

“She can hear me,” Meredith told him. “She talks to me almost every night. She hasn’t gone as far away as you think.”

“I’m still your father, and you’re still a child who can’t even begin to understand what’s at stake, what’s always pushing at the other side of – ”

“ – the gate?” she asked, interrupting and finishing for him, and she put one hand flat against the door, the upper of its two big panels, and leaned all her weight against it. “What happens next time? Do you know that, Father? How much longer do we have left, or haven’t the constellations gotten around to telling you that yet?”

“Don’t mock me, Meredith.”

“Why not?” and she stared back at him over her shoulder, without taking her hand off the door. “Will it damn me faster? Will it cause more men to die in the trenches? Will it cause Avery more pain than he’s in now?”

“*I* was given the book,” he growled at her, his stony face flashing to bitter anger, and at least that gave Meredith some mean scrap of satisfaction. “I was shown the way to this place. They entrusted the gate to me, child. The gods – ”

“ – must be even bigger fools than you, old man. Now shut up, and leave me alone.”

Machen Dandridge raised his right hand to strike her, his big-knuckled hand like a hammer of flesh and bone, iron-meat hammer and anvil to beat her as thin and friable as the veil between Siamese universes.

“You’ll need me,” she said, not recoiling from the fire in his dark eyes, standing her ground. “You can’t take my place. Even if you weren’t a coward, you couldn’t take my place.”

“You’ve become a wicked child,” he said, slowly lowering his hand until it hung useless at his side.

“Yes, Father, I have. I’ve become a *very* wicked child. You’d best pray that I’ve become wicked enough.”

And he didn’t reply, no words left in him, but walked quickly away down the long hall towards the foyer and his library, his footsteps loud as distant gunshots, loud as the beating of her heart, and Meredith removed her hand from the door. It burned very slightly, pain like a healing bee sting, and when she looked at her palm there was something new there, a fat and shiny swelling as black and round and smooth as the soulless eye of a shark.

February 1915

In his dreams, Machen Dandridge stands at the edge of the sea and watches the firelight reflected in the roiling grey clouds above Russia and Austria and East Prussia, smells the coppery stink of Turkish and German

blood, the life leaking from the bullet holes left in the Serbian Archduke and his wife. Machen would look away if he knew how, wouldn't see what he can only see too late to make any difference. One small man set adrift and then cast up on the shingle of the cosmos, filled to bursting with knowledge and knowing nothing at all. Cannon fire and thunder, the breakers against the cliff side and the death rattle of soldiers beyond counting.

This is where I stand, at the bottom gate, and I hold the key to the abyss…

"A *world* war, father," Avery says. "Something without precedent. I can't even find words to describe the things I've seen."

"A world war, without precedent?" Machen replies skeptically and raises one eyebrow, then goes back to reading his star charts. "Napoleon just might disagree with you there, young man, and Alexander, as well."

"No, you don't understand what I'm saying – "

And the fire in the sky grows brighter, coalescing into a whip of red-gold scales and ebony spines, the dragon's tail to lash the damned. *Every one of us is damned*, Machen thinks. *Every one of us, from the bloody start of time.*

"I have the texts, Avery, and the aegis of the seven, and all the old ways. I cannot very well set that all aside because you've been having nightmares, now can I?"

"I know these things, Father. I know them like I know my own heart, like I know the number of steps down to the deep place."

"There is a trouble brewing in Coma Berenices," his wife whispers, her eye pressed to the eyepiece of the big telescope in his library. "Something like a shadow."

"She says that later," Avery tells him. "That hasn't happened yet, but it will. But you won't listen to her, either."

And Machen Dandridge turns his back on the sea and the dragon, on the battlefields and the burning cities, looking back towards the house he built twenty-five years ago. The air in the library seems suddenly very close, too warm, too thick. He loosens his paper collar and stares at his son sitting across the wide mahogany desk from him.

"I'm not sure I know what you mean, boy," he says, and Avery sighs loudly and runs his fingers through his brown hair.

“Mother isn’t even at the window now. That’s still two weeks from now,” and it’s true that no one’s standing at the telescope. Machen rubs his eyes and reaches for his spectacles. “By then, it’ll be too late. It may be too late already,” Avery says.

“Listen to him, Father,” Meredith begs with her mother’s voice, and then she lays a small, wilted bouquet of autumn wildflowers on Ellen Dandridge’s grave. The smell of the broken earth at the top of the hill is not so different from the smell of the French trenches.

“I did listen to him, Merry.”

“You let him talk. You know the difference.”

“Did I ever tell you about the lights in the sky the night that you were born?”

“Yes, Father. A hundred times.”

“There were no lights at your brother’s birth.”

Behind him, the sea makes a sound like a giant rolling over in its sleep, and Machen looks away from the house again, stares out across the surging black Pacific. There are the carcasses of whales and sea lions and a billion fish and the bloated carcasses of things even he doesn’t know the names for, floating in the surf. Scarlet-eyed night birds swoop down to eat their fill of carrion. The water is so thick with dead things and maggots and blood that soon there will be no water left at all.

“The gate chooses the key,” his wife says sternly, sadly, standing at the open door leading down to the deep place beneath the house, the bottomless, phosphorescent pool at the foot of the winding, rickety steps. The short pier and the rock rising up from those depths, the little island with its cave and shackles. “You can’t change that part, no matter what the seven have given you.”

“It wasn’t me sent Avery down there, Ellen.”

“It wasn’t either one of us. But neither of us listened to him, so maybe it’s the same as if we both did.”

The sea as thick as buttermilk, buttermilk and blood beneath a rotten moon, and the dragon’s tail flicks through the stars.

“Writing the history of the end of the world,” Meredith says, standing at the telescope, peering into the eyepiece, turning first this knob, then that one, trying to bring something in the night sky into sharper focus. “That’s what he kept saying, anyway. ‘I am writing the history of the end of the

world. I’m writing the history of the future.’ Father, did you know that there’s trouble in Coma Berenices?”

“Was that you?” he asks her. “Was that you said that or was that your mother?”

“Is there any difference? And if so, do you know the difference?”

“Are these visions, Merry? Are these terrible visions that I may yet hope to affect?”

“Will you keep him locked in that room forever?” she asks, not answering his questions, not even taking her eye from the telescope.

Before his wife leaves the hallway, before she steps onto the unsteady landing at the top of the stairs, she kisses Meredith on the top of her head and then glares at her husband, her eyes like judgment on the last day of all, the eyes of seraphim and burning swords. The diseased sea slams against the cliffs, dislodging chunks of shale, silt gone to stone when the great reptiles roamed the planet and the gods still had countless revolutions and upheavals to attend to before the beginning of the tragedy of mankind.

“Machen,” his wife says. “If you had listened, had you allowed me to listen, everything might have been different. The war, what’s been done to Avery, all of it. If you’d but *listened*.”

And the dream rolls on and on and on behind his eyes, down the stairs and to the glowing water, his wife alone in the tiny boat, rowing across the pool to the rocky island far beneath the house. The hemorrhaging, pus-colored sea throwing itself furiously against the walls of the cavern, wanting in, and it’s always only a matter of time. Meredith standing on the pier behind him, chanting the prayers he’s taught her, the prayers to keep the gate from opening before Ellen reaches that other shore.

The yellow-green light beneath the pool below the house wavers, then grows brighter by degrees.

The dragon’s tail flicks at the suicidal world.

In his attic, Avery screams with the new mouth the gate gave him before it spit the boy, twisted and insane, back into this place, this time.

The oars dipping again and again into the brilliant, glowing water, the creak of the rusted oarlocks, old nails grown loose in decaying wood; shafts of light from the pool playing across the uneven walls of the cavern.

The dragon opens one blistered eye.

And Ellen Dandridge steps out of the boat onto the island. She doesn’t look back at her husband and daughter.

“Something like a shadow,” Meredith says, taking her right eye from the telescope and looking across the room at her brother, who isn’t sitting in the chair across from Machen.

“It’s not a shadow,” Avery doesn’t tell her, and goes back to the things he has to write down in his journals before there’s no time left.

On the island, the gate tears itself open, the dragon’s eye, angel eye, and the unspeakable face of the gargantuan sleeper in an unnamed, sunken city, tearing itself wide to see if she’s the one it’s called down or if it’s some other. The summoned or the trespasser. The invited or the interloper. And Machen knows from the way the air has begun to shimmer and sing that the sleeper doesn’t like what it sees.

“I stand at the gate and hold the key,” she says. “You know my name, and I have come to hold the line. I have come only that you might not pass.”

“Don’t look, Merry. Close your eyes,” and Machen holds his daughter close to him as the air stops singing, as it begins to sizzle and pop and burn.

The waves against the shore.

The dragon’s tail across the sky.

The empty boat pulled down into the shimmering pool.

Something glimpsed through a telescope.

The ribsy, omnivorous dogs of war.

And then Machen woke in his bed, a storm lashing fiercely at the windows, the lightning exploding out there like mortar shells, and the distant *thump, thump, thump* of his lost son from the attic. He didn’t close his eyes again, but lay very still, sweating and listening to the rain and the thumping, until the sun rose somewhere behind the clouds to turn the black to cheerless, leaden grey.

August 1889

After his travels, after Baghdad and the ruins of Nineveh and Babylon, after the hidden mosque in Reza’lyah and the peculiar artifacts he’d collected on the southernmost shore of Lake Urmia, Machen Dandridge went west to California. In the summer of 1889, he married Ellen Douglas-Winslow, black-sheep daughter of a fine old Boston family, and together they traveled by train, the smoking iron horses and steel rails that his own father had made his fortune from, riding all the way to the bustling squalor and Nob Hill sanctuaries of San Francisco. For a time they took up residence in a

modest house on Russian Hill, while Machen taught his wife the things that he'd learned in the East – archaeology and astrology, Hebrew and Islamic mysticism, the Talmud and Qur'an, the secrets of the terrible black book that had been given to him by a blind and leprous mullah. Ellen had disgraced her family at an early age by claiming the abilities of a medium and then backing up her claims with extravagant séances and spectacular ectoplasmic displays. Machen found in her an eager pupil.

"Why would he have given the book to you?" Ellen asked skeptically, the first time Machen had shown it to her, the first time he'd taken it from its iron and leather case in her presence. "If it's what you say it is, why would he have given it to anyone?"

"Because, my dear, I had a pistol pressed against his skull," Machen had replied, unwrapping the book, slowly peeling back the layers of lambskin it was wrapped in. "That and knowledge he'd been searching for his entire life. Trust me. It was a fair trade."

And just as the book had led him back from Asia to America and on to California, the brittle, parchment compass of its pages had shown him the way north along the coast to the high cliffs north of Anchor Bay. That first trip, he left Ellen behind, traveling with only the company of a Miwok Indian guide who claimed knowledge of "a hole in the world." But when they finally left the shelter of the redwood forest and stood at the edge of a vast and undulating sea of pampas grass stretching away towards the Pacific, the Miwok had refused to go any farther. No amount of money or talk could persuade him to approach the cliffs waiting beyond the grass, and so Machen continued on alone.

Beneath the hot summer sun, the low, rolling hills seemed to go on forever. The gulls and a pair of red-tailed hawks screamed at him like harpies warning him away, screeching threats or alarum from the endless cornflower sky. But he found it, finally, the "hole in the world," right where the Miwok guide had said that he would, maybe fifty yards from the cliffs.

From what he'd taught himself of geology, Machen guessed it to be the collapsed roof of a cavern, an opening no more than five or six feet across, granting access to an almost vertical chimney eroded through tilted beds of limestone and shale and probably connecting to the sea somewhere in the darkness below. He dropped a large pebble into the hole and listened and counted as it fell, ticking off the seconds until it splashed faintly, confirming his belief that the cavern was connected to the sea. A musty, briny smell

wafted up from the hole, uninviting, sickly, and though there was climbing equipment in his pack, and he was competent with ropes and knots and had, more than once, descended treacherous, crumbling shafts into ancient tombs and wells, Machen Dandridge only stood there at the entrance, dropping stones and listening to the eventual splashes. He stared into the hole and, after a while, could discern a faint but unmistakable light, not the fading sunlight getting in from some cleft in the cliff face, but light like a glass of absinthe, the sort of light he'd imagined abyssal creatures that never saw the sun might make to shine their way through the murk.

It wasn't what he'd expected, from what was written in the black book, no towering gate of horn and ivory, no arch of gold and silver guarded by angels or demons or beings men had never fashioned names for, just this unassuming hole in the ground. He sat in the grass, watching the sunset burning day to night, wondering if the Miwok had deserted him. Wondering if the quest had been a fool's errand from the very start, and he'd wasted so many years of his life, and so much of his inheritance, chasing connections and truths that only existed because he wished to see them. By dark, the light shone up through the hole like the chartreuse glare through the grate of an unearthly furnace, taunting or reassuring but beckoning him forward. Promising there was more to come.

"What is it you think you will find?" the old priest had asked after he'd handed over the book. "More to the point, what is it you think will find *you*?"

Not a question he could answer then and not one he could answer sitting there with the roar of the surf in his ears and the stars speckling the sky overhead. The question that Ellen had asked him again and again, and always he'd found some way to deflect her asking. But he *knew* the answer, sewn up somewhere deep within his soul, even if he'd never been able to find the words. Proof that the world did not end at his fingertips or with the unreliable data of his eyes and ears or the lies and half-truths men had written down in science and history books, that everything he'd ever seen was merely a tattered curtain waiting to be drawn back so that some more indisputable light might, at last, shine through.

"Is that what you were seeking, Mr. Dandridge?" and Machen had turned quickly, his heart pounding as he reached for the pistol at his hip, only to find the old Indian watching him from the tall, rustling grass a few

feet away. “Is *this* the end of your journey?” and the guide pointed at the hole.

“I thought you were afraid to come here?” Machen asked, annoyed at the interruption, sitting back down beside the hole, looking again into the unsteady yellow-green light spilling out of the earth.

“I was,” the Miwok replied. “But the ghost of my grandfather came to me and told me he was ashamed of me, that I was a coward for allowing you to come to this evil place alone. He has promised to protect me from the demons.”

“The ghost of your grandfather?” Machen laughed and shook his head, then dropped another pebble into the hole.

“Yes. He is watching us both now, but he also wishes we would leave soon. I can show you the way back to the trail.”

The key I have accepted full in the knowledge of its weight.

“You’re a brave man,” Machen said. “Or another lunatic.”

“All brave men are lunatics,” the Indian said and glanced nervously at the hole, the starry indigo sky, the cliff and the invisible ocean, each in its turn. “Sane men do not go looking for their deaths.”

“Is that all I’ve found here? My death?”

There was a long moment of anxious silence from the guide, broken only by the ceaseless interwoven roar of the waves and the wind, and then he took a step back away from the hole, deeper into the sheltering pampas grass.

“I cannot say what you have found in this place, Mr. Dandridge. My grandfather says I should not speak its name.”

“Is that so? Well, then,” and Machen stood, rubbing his aching eyes and brushed the dust from his pants. “You show me the way back and forget you ever brought me out here. Tell your grandfather’s poor ghost that I will not hold you responsible for whatever it is I’m meant to find at the bottom of that pit.”

“My grandfather hears you,” the Miwok said. “He says you are a brave man and a lunatic, and that I should kill you now, before you do the things you will do in the days to come. Before you set the world against itself.”

Machen drew his Colt, cocked the hammer with his thumb, and stood staring into the gloom at the Indian.

“But I will not kill you,” the Miwok said. “That is *my* choice, and I have chosen not to take your life. But I will pray it is not a decision I will

regret later. We should go now."

"After you," Machen said, smiling through the quaver in his voice that he hoped the guide couldn't hear, his heart racing and cold sweat starting to drip from his face despite the night air. And, without another word, the Indian turned and disappeared into the arms of the whispering grass and the August night.

July 1914

When she was very sure that her father had shut the double doors to his study and that her mother was asleep, when the only sounds were the sea and the wind, the inconstant, shifting noises that all houses make after dark, the mice in the walls, Meredith slipped out of bed and into her flannel dressing gown. The floor was cool against her bare feet, cool but not cold. She lit a candle, and then eased the heavy bedroom door shut behind her and went as quickly and quietly as she could to the cramped stairwell leading from the second story to the attic door. At the top, she sat down on the landing and held her breath, listening, praying that no one had heard her, that neither her father nor mother, nor the both of them together, were already trying to find her.

There were no sounds at all from the other side of the narrow attic door. She set the candlestick down and leaned close to it, pressing her lips against the wood, feeling the rough grain through the varnish.

"Avery?" she whispered. "Avery, can you hear me?"

At first there was no reply from the attic, and she took a deep breath and waited a while, waiting for her parents' angry or worried footsteps, waiting for one of them to begin shouting her name from the house below.

But there were no footsteps, and no one called her name.

"*Avery*? Can you hear me? It's *me*, Merry."

That time there was a sudden thumping and a heavy dragging sort of a sound from the other side of the attic door. A body pulling itself roughly, painfully across the pine-board floor towards her, and she closed her eyes and waited for it. Finally, there was a loud thud against the door, and she opened her eyes again. Avery was trying to talk, trying to answer her, but there was nothing familiar or coherent in his ruined voice.

"Hold on," she whispered to him. "I brought a writing pad." She took it out of a pocket of her gown, the pad and a pencil. "Don't try to talk any

more. I'll pass this beneath the door to you, and you can write what you want to say. Knock once if you understand what I'm telling you, Avery."

Nothing for almost a full minute and then a single knock so violent that the door shivered on its hinges, so loudly she was sure it would bring her parents running to investigate.

"You must be quieter, Avery," she whispered. "They'll hear us," and now Meredith had begun to notice the odor on the landing, the odor leaking from the attic. Either she'd been much too nervous to notice it at first or her brother had brought it with him when he'd crawled over to the door. Dead fish and boiling cabbage, soured milk and strawberry jam, the time she'd come across the carcass of a grey whale calf, half buried in the sand and decomposing beneath the sun. She swallowed, took another deep breath, and tried not to think about the awful smell.

"I'm going to pass the pencil and a page from the pad to you now. I'm going to slide it under the door to you."

Avery made a wet, strangling sound, and she told him again not to try to talk, just write if he could, write the answers to her questions and anything else that he needed to say.

"Are you in pain? Is there any way I can help?" she asked, and in a moment the tip of the pencil began scritching loudly across the sheet of writing paper. "Not so hard, Avery. If the lead breaks, I'll have to try to find another."

He slid the piece of paper back to her, and it was damp and something dark and sticky was smudged across the bottom. She held it close to her face, never mind the smell so strong it made her gag, made her want to retch, so that she could read what he'd scrawled there. It was nothing like Avery's careful hand, his tight, precise cursive she'd always admired and had tried to imitate, but sweeping, crooked letters, blocky print, and seeing that made her want to cry so badly that she almost forgot about the dead-whale-and-cabbages smell.

HURTSS ME MERY MORE THAN CAN NO

NO HELP NO HELLP ME

She laid down the sheet of paper and tore another from her pad, the pad she used for her afternoon lessons, spelling and arithmetic, and she slid it beneath the door to Avery.

"Avery, you *knew* you couldn't bear the key. You knew it had to be me or mother, *didn't* you? That it had to be a woman?"

Again the scritching, and the paper came back to her even stickier than before.

HAD TO TRY MOTER WOULD NOT LISSEN SO
I HAD TOO TRIE

“Oh, Avery,” Meredith said. “I’m sorry,” speaking so quietly that she prayed he would not hear, and there were tears in her eyes, hot and bitter. A kind of anger and a kind of sorrow in her heart that she’d never known before, anger and sorrow blooming in her to be fused through some alchemy of the soul, and by that fusion be transformed into a pure and golden hate.

She tore another page from the pad and slipped it through the crack between the floor and the attic door.

“I need to know what to *do*, Avery. I’m reading the newspapers, but I don’t understand it all. Everyone seems think war is coming soon, because of the assassination in Sarajevo, because of the Kaiser, but I don’t *understand* it all.”

It was a long time before the paper came back to her, smeared with slime and stinking of corruption, maybe five minutes of Avery’s scritching and his silent pauses between the scritching. This time the page was covered from top to bottom with his clumsy scrawl.

TO LATE ~~IF~~ TO STOP WAR TOO LATE NOW
WAR IS COMING NOW CANT STP THAT MERRY
<u>ALL</u> SET IN MOTION NINTH WAVE REMEMBER?
BUT MERY YOU CAN DONT LISSEN TO FADER
YOU <u>CAN</u> HOLD ~~NINE~~ THEE LINE STILL TYME
YOU OR MOTHER KIN HOLD THEE LIN STILL
IT DOEZ NOT HALF TO BE THE <u>LADST</u> WAR

When she finished reading and then re-reading twice again everything Avery had written, Meredith lay the sheet of paper down on top of the other two and wiped her hand on the floor until it didn’t feel quite so slimy anymore. By the yellow-white light of the candle, her hand shimmered as though she’d been carrying around one of the big banana slugs that lived in the forest. She quickly ripped another page from the writing pad and passed it under the door. This time she felt it snatched from her fingers, and the scritching began immediately. It came back to her only a few seconds later and the pencil with it, the tip ground away to nothing.

DUNT <u>EVER</u> COME BAK HERE AGIN MERRY

I LOVE YOU ALWAYTS AND WONT FERGET YOU
PROMISS ME YOU WILL KNOT COME BACK
HOLD THEE LINE HOLD THE LINE

"I can't promise you that, Avery," she replied, sobbing and leaning close to the door, despite the smell so strong that it had begun to burn her nose and the back of her throat. "You're my brother, and I can't ever promise you that."

There was another violent thud against the door then, so hard that her father was sure to have heard, so sudden that it scared her, and Meredith jumped back and reached for the candlestick.

"I remember the ninth wave, Avery. I remember what you said – the ninth wave, greater than the last, all in flame. I *do* remember."

And because she thought that perhaps she heard footsteps from somewhere below, and because she couldn't stand to hear the frantic strangling sounds that Avery had begun making again, Meredith hastily gathered up the sticky, scribbled-on pages from the pad and then crept down the attic stairs and back to her bedroom. She fell asleep just before dawn and dreamt of flames among the breakers, an inferno crashing against the rocks.

March 1915

"This is where it ends," Merry, her mother's ghost said. "But this is where it begins, as well. You need to understand that if you understand nothing else."

Meredith knew that this time she was not dreaming, no matter how much it might *feel* like a dream, this dazzling, tumbling nightmare wide-awake that began when she reached the foot of the rickety spiraling staircase leading her down into the deep place beneath the house. Following her mother's ghost, the dim glow of a spectre to be her Virgil, her Beatrice, her guiding lantern until the light from the pool was so bright it outshone Ellen Dandridge's flickering radiance. Meredith stood on the pier, holding her dead mother's barnacle-and algae-encrusted hand, and stared in fear and wonder towards the island in the pool.

"The infinite lines of causation," the ghost said. "What has brought you here. That is important, as well."

"I'm here because my father is a fool," Meredith replied, unable to look away from the yellow-green light dancing across the stone, shining up

from the depths beneath her bare feet.

“No, dear. He is only a man trying to do the work of gods. That never turns out well.”

The black eye set deep into the flesh of Meredith’s palm itched painfully and then rolled back to show its dead-white sclera. She knew exactly what it was seeing, because it always told her; she knew how close they were to the veil, how little time was left before the breach tore itself open once and for all.

“Try to forget your father, child. Concentrate on time and space, the aether, on the history that has brought you here. All the strands of the web.”

Meredith squeezed the ghost’s soft hand, and the dates and names and places spilled through her like the sea spilling across the shore, a flood of obvious and obscure connections, and she gritted her teeth and let them come.

On December 2, 1870, Bismarck sends a letter to Wilhelm of Prussia urging him to become Kaiser. In 1874, all Jesuits are ordered to leave Italy, and on January 8th, 1877, Crazy Horse is defeated by the U.S. cavalry at Wolf Mountain in Montana. In June 1881, Austria signs a secret treaty with the Serbs, establishing an economic and political protectorate, and Milan is crowned King of Serbia –

“It hurts,” she whispered; her mother frowned and nodded her head as the light from the pool began to pulse and spin, casting counterclockwise glare and shadow across the towering rock walls.

“It will always hurt, dear. It will be pain beyond imagining. You cannot be lied to about that. You cannot be led to bear this weight in ignorance of the pain that comes with the key.”

Meredith took another hesitant step towards the end of the short pier, and then another, and the light swelled angrily and spun hurricane fury below and about her.

“They are rising, Merry. They have teeth and claws sharp as steel, and will devour you if you don’t hurry. You must go to the island now. The breach is opening.”

“I am afraid, mother. I’m so sorry, but I *am* afraid.”

“Then the fear will lead you where I can’t. Make the fear your shield. Make the fear your lance.”

Standing at the very end of the pier, Meredith didn’t dare look down into the shining pool, kept her eyes on the tiny island only fifteen or twenty

feet away.

“They took the boat when you crossed over,” she said to her mother’s ghost. “How am I supposed to reach the gate when they’ve taken the boat away?”

“You’re a strong swimmer, child. Avery taught you to swim.”

A sound like lightning, and *No*, she thought. *I can’t do that. I can do anything except step off this pier into that water with them. I can stand the pain, but –*

“If you know another way, Merry, then take it. But there isn’t much time left. The lines are converging.”

Merry took a deep breath, gulping the cavern’s dank and foetid air, hyperventilating, bracing for the breathless cold to come, all the things that her brother had taught her about swimming in the sea. Together they’d swum out past the breakers, to the kelp forest in the deep water farther offshore, the undulating submarine weald where bat rays and harbor seals raced between the gigantic stalks of kelp, where she’d looked up and seen the lead-pale belly of an immense white shark passing silently overhead.

“Time, Merry. It is all in your hands now. See how you stand alone at the center of the web and the strands stretch away from you? See the intersections and interweaves?”

“I see them,” she said. “I see them all,” and she stepped off into the icy water.

October 30th, 1883, an Austro-German treaty with Romania is signed, providing Romania defence against the Russians. November 17th, 1885, the Serbs are defeated at the Battle of Slivnitza and then ultimately saved only by Austrian intervention. 1887, and the Mahdist War with Abyssinia begins. 1889, and a boy named Silas Desvernine sails up the Hudson River and first sees a mountain where a nameless being of moonlight and thunder is held inside a black stone. August 1889, and her father is led to the edge of the Pacific by a Miwok guide. August 27th, 1891, the Franco-Russian Entente –

The strands of the web, the ticking of a clock, the life and death of stars, each step towards Armageddon checked off in her aching head, and the water is liquid ice threatening to freeze her alive. Suddenly, the tiny island seemed miles and miles away.

1895 August, and Kaiser Wilhelm visits England for Queen Victoria’s Golden Jubilee. 1896, Charles E. Callwell of the British Army publishes

Small Wars – Their Principles and Practice. *February 4th, 1899, the year Aguinaldo leads a Philippine Insurrection against U.S. forces –*

All of these events, all of these men and their actions. Lies and blood and betrayals, links in the chain leading, finally, to this moment, to that ninth wave, mightier than the last, all in flame. Meredith swallowed a mouthful of sea water and struggled to keep her head above the surface.

"Hurry, child!" her mother's ghost shouted from the pier. "They are rising," and Meredith Dandridge began to pray then that she would fail, would surrender in another moment or two and let the deep have her. Imagined sinking down and down for all eternity, pressure to crush her flat and numb, to crush her so small that nothing and no one would ever have any need to harm her again.

Something sharp as steel swiped across her ankle, slicing her skin, and her blood mingled with the sea.

And the next stroke drove her fingers into the mud and pebbles at the edge of the island. She dragged herself quickly from the pool, from the water and the mire, and looked back the way she'd come. There were no demons in the water, and her mother's ghost wasn't watching from the pier. But her father was, Machen Dandridge and his terrible black book, his eyes upturned and arms outstretched to an indifferent Heaven. She cursed him for the last time ever and ignored the blood oozing from the ugly gash in her right foot.

"This is where I stand," she said, getting to her feet and turning towards the small cave at the center of the island, her legs as weak and unsteady as a newborn foal's. "At the bottom gate, and I hold the key to the abyss."

The yellow-green light was almost blinding, and soon the pool would begin to boil.

"The ebony key to the first day and the last, the key to the moment when the stars wink out one by one and the sea heaves its rotting belly at the empty, sagging sky. The blazing key that even angels fear to keep."

For an instant, there was no cave, and no pool, and no cavern beneath a resentful, wicked house. Only the fire, pouring from the cave that was no longer there, to swallow her whole, only the voices of the void, and Meredith Dandridge made her fear a shield and a lance and held the line.

And in the days and weeks that followed, sometimes Machen Dandridge came down the stairs to stand on the pier and gaze across the pool to the place where the thing that had been his daughter nestled in the shadows, in the hollows between the stones. And every day the sea gave her more of its armour, gilding her frail human skin with the calcareous shells and stinging tentacles that other creatures had spent countless cycles of Creation refining from the rawest matter of life, the needle teeth, the scales and poisonous barbs. Where his wife and son had failed, his daughter crouched triumphant as any martyr. And sometimes, late at night, alone with the sound of the surf pounding against the edge of the continent, he sometimes thought of setting fire to the house and letting it burn down around him.

He read the newspapers.

He watched the stars for signs and portents.

When the moon was bright, the odd, mute women still came to dance beside the sea, but he'd begun to believe they were only bad memories from some time before, and so he rarely paid them any heed.

When the weather was good, he climbed the hills behind the house and sat at the grave of his dead wife and whispered to her, telling her how proud he was of Meredith, reciting snatches of half-remembered poetry for Ellen, telling her the world would come very close to the brink because of what he'd done. Because of his blind pride. But, in the end, it would survive because of what their daughter had done and would do for ages yet.

On a long rainy afternoon in May, he opened the attic door and killed what he found there with an axe and his old Colt revolver. He buried it beside his wife, but left nothing to mark Avery's grave.

He wrote long letters to men he'd once known in England and New York and Rio de Janeiro, but there were never any replies.

And time rolled on, neither malign nor beneficent, settling across the universe like the grey caul of dust settling thick upon the relics he'd brought back from India and Iran and the Sudan a quarter of a century before. The birth and death of stars, light reaching his aging eyes after a billion years racing across the near-vacuum, and sometimes he spent the days gathering fossils from the cliffs and arranging them in precise geometric patterns in the tall grass around the house. He left lines of salt and drew elaborate runes, the meanings of which he'd long since forgotten.

His daughter spoke to him only in his dreams, or hers, no way to ever be sure which was which, and her voice grew stronger and more terrible as the years rushed past. In the end, she was a maelstrom to swallow his withered soul, to rock him to sleep one last time, to show him the way across.

And the house by the sea, weathered and weary and insane, kept its secrets.

ANDROMEDA AMONG THE STONES

There was a turning point, and it’s right about here, this story. My voice shifted, a shift that was conscious, in part, and unconscious, in part. The style that had served me since 1995 or so, with all it’s unconventional grammar and compounderations, began to feel like self-parody. Then again, the shift may have begun as far back as 2001, *before* this story, but by 2003 (*after* I wrote this story) it was a done deal. So, this story is caught in transition. Also, it closes my three-story Dandridge Cycle.

La Peau Verte

1.

In a dusty, antique-littered back room of the loft on St. Mark's Place, room with walls the color of ripe cranberries, Hannah stands naked in front of the towering mahogany-framed mirror and stares at herself. No – not *her* self any longer, but the new thing that the man and woman have made of her. Three long hours busy with their airbrushes and latex prosthetics, grease paints and powders and spirit gum, their four hands moving as one, roaming excitedly and certainly across her body, hands sure of their purpose. She doesn't remember their names, if, in fact, they ever told their names to her. Maybe they did, but the two glasses of brandy she's had have set the names somewhere just beyond recall. Him tall and thin, her thin but not so very tall, and now they've both gone, leaving Hannah alone. Perhaps their part in this finished; perhaps the man and woman are being paid, and she'll never see either of them again, and she feels a sudden, unexpected pang at the thought, never one for casual intimacies, and they have been both casual and intimate with her body.

The door opens, and the music from the party grows suddenly louder. Nothing she would ever recognize, probably nothing that has a name, even; wild impromptu of drumming hands and flutes, violins and cellos, an incongruent music that is both primitive and drawing-room practiced. The old woman with the mask of peacock feathers and gown of iridescent satin stands in the doorway, watching Hannah. After a moment, she smiles and nods her head slowly, appreciatively.

"Very pretty," she says. "How does it feel?"

"A little strange," Hannah replies and looks at the mirror again. "I've never done anything like this before."

"Haven't you?" the old woman asks her, and Hannah remembers her name, then – Jackie, Jackie something that sounds like Shady or Sadie, but isn't either. A sculptor from England, someone said. When she was very young, she knew Picasso, and someone said that, too.

"No," Hannah replies. "I haven't. Are they ready for me now?"

"Fifteen more minutes, give or take. I'll be back to bring you in. Relax. Would you like another brandy?"

Would I? Hannah thinks and glances down at the crystal snifter sitting atop an old secretary next to the mirror. It's almost empty now, maybe one last warm amber sip standing between it and empty. She wants another drink, something to burn away the last, lingering dregs of her inhibition and self-doubt, but "No," she tells the woman. "I'm fine."

"Then chill, and I'll see you in fifteen," Jackie Whomever says, smiles again, her disarming, inviting smile of perfect white teeth, and she closes the door, leaving Hannah alone with the green thing watching her from the mirror.

The old Tiffany lamps scattered around the room shed candy puddles of stained-glass light, light as warm as the brandy, warm as the dark-chocolate tones of the intricately carved frame holding the tall mirror. She takes one tentative step nearer the glass, and the green thing takes an equally tentative step nearer her. *I'm in there somewhere,* she thinks. *Aren't I?*

Her skin painted too many competing, complementary shades of green to possibly count, one shade bleeding into the next, an infinity of greens that seem to roil and flow around her bare legs, her flat, hard stomach, her breasts. No patch of skin left uncovered, her flesh become a rain-forest canopy, autumn waves in rough, shallow coves, the shells of beetles and leaves from a thousand gardens, moss and emeralds, jade statues and the brilliant scales of poisonous tropical serpents. Her nails polished a green so deep it might almost be black, instead. The uncomfortable scleral contacts to turn her eyes into the blaze of twin chartreuse stars, and Hannah leans a little closer to the mirror, blinking at those eyes, *with* those eyes, the windows to a soul she doesn't have. A soul of everything vegetable and living, everything growing or not, soul of sage and pond scum, malachite and verdigris. The fragile translucent wings sprouting from her shoulder blades – at least another thousand greens to consider in those wings alone – and all the many places where they've been painstakingly attached to her skin are hidden so expertly she's no longer sure where the wings end and she begins.

The one, and the other.

"I definitely should have asked for another brandy," Hannah says out loud, spilling the words nervously from her ocher, olive, turquoise lips.

Her hair – not *her* hair, but the wig *hiding* her hair – like something parasitic, something growing from the bark of a rotting tree, epiphyte curls

across her painted shoulders, spilling down her back between and around the base of the wings. The long tips the man and woman added to her ears so dark that they almost match her nails, and her nipples airbrushed the same lightless, bottomless green, as well. She smiles, and even her teeth have been tinted a matte pea green.

There is a single teardrop of green glass glued firmly between her lichen eyebrows.

I could get lost in here, she thinks, and immediately wishes she'd thought something else instead.

Perhaps I am already.

And then Hannah forces herself to look away from the mirror, reaches for the brandy snifter and the last swallow of her drink. Too much of the night still lies ahead of her to get freaked out over a costume, too much left to do and way too much money for her to risk getting cold feet now. She finishes the brandy, and the new warmth spreading through her belly is reassuring.

Hannah sets the empty glass back down on the secretary and then looks at herself again. And this time it *is* her self, after all, the familiar lines of her face still visible just beneath the make-up. But it's a damn good illusion. *Whoever the hell's paying for this is certainly getting his money's worth,* she thinks.

Beyond the back room, the music seems to be rising, swelling quickly towards crescendo, the strings racing the flutes, the drums hammering along underneath. The old woman named Jackie will be back for her soon. Hannah takes a deep breath, filling her lungs with air that smells and tastes like dust and old furniture, like the paint on her skin, more faintly of the summer rain falling on the roof of the building. She exhales slowly and stares longingly at the empty snifter.

"Better to keep a clear head," she reminds herself.

Is that what I have here? And she laughs, but something about the room or her reflection in the tall mirror turns the sound into little more than a cheerless cough.

And then Hannah stares at the beautiful, impossible green woman staring back at her, and waits.

2.

“Anything forbidden becomes mysterious,” Peter says and picks up his remaining bishop, then sets it back down on the board without making a move. “And mysterious things always become attractive to us, sooner or later. Usually sooner.”

“What is that? Some sort of unwritten social law?” Hannah asks him, distracted by the Beethoven that he always insists on whenever they play chess. *Die Geschöpfe des Prometheus* at the moment, and she’s pretty sure he only does it to break her concentration.

“No, dear. Just a statement of the fucking obvious.”

Peter picks up the black bishop again, and this time he almost uses it to capture one of her rooks, then thinks better of it. More than thirty years her senior and the first friend she made after coming to Manhattan, his salt-and-pepper beard and mustache that’s mostly salt, his eyes as grey as a winter sky.

“Oh,” she says, wishing he’d just take the damn rook and be done with it. Two moves from checkmate, barring an act of divine intervention. But that’s another of his games, Delaying the Inevitable. She thinks he probably has a couple of trophies for it stashed away somewhere in his cluttered apartment, chintzy *faux* golden loving cups for his Skill and Excellence in Procrastination.

“Taboo breeds desire. Gluttony breeds disinterest.”

“Jesus, I ought to write these things down,” she says, and he smirks at her, dangling the bishop teasingly only an inch or so above the chessboard.

“Yes, you really should. My agent could probably sell them to someone or another. *Peter Mulligan’s Big Book of Tiresome Truths.* I’m sure it would be more popular than my last novel. It certainly couldn’t be *less* – ”

“Will you stop it and *move* already? Take the damned rook, and get it over with.”

“But it *might* be a mistake,” he says and leans back in his chair, mock suspicion on his face, one eyebrow cocked, and he points towards her queen. “It could be a trap. You might be one of those predators that fakes out its quarry by playing dead.”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Yes I do. You know what I mean. Those animals, the ones that only *pretend* to be dead. You might be one of those.”

“I *might* just get tired of this and go the hell home,” she sighs, because he knows that she won’t, so she can say whatever she wants.

“Anyway,” he says, “it’s work, if you want it. It’s just a party. Sounds like an easy gig to me.”

“I have that thing on Tuesday morning though, and I don’t want to be up all night.”

“Another shoot with Kellerman?” asks Peter and frowns at her, taking his eyes off the board, tapping at his chin with the bishop’s mitre.

“Is there something wrong with that?”

“You hear things, that’s all. Well, *I* hear things. I don’t think you ever hear anything at all.”

“I need the work, Pete. The last time I sold a piece, I think Lincoln was still President. I’ll never make as much money painting as I do posing for *other* people’s art.”

“Poor Hannah,” Peter says. He sets the bishop back down beside his king and lights a cigarette. She almost asks him for one, but he thinks she quit three months ago, and it’s nice having at least that one thing to lord over him; sometimes it’s even useful. “At least you *have* a fallback,” he mutters and exhales; the smoke lingers above the board like fog on a battlefield.

“Do you even know who these people are?” she asks and looks impatiently at the clock above his kitchen sink.

“Not firsthand, no. But then they’re not exactly my sort. Entirely too, well…” and Peter pauses, searching for a word that never comes, so he continues without it. “But the Frenchman who owns the place on St. Mark’s, Mr. Ordinaire – excuse me, *Monsieur* Ordinaire – I heard he used to be some sort of anthropologist. I think he might have written a book once.”

“Maybe Kellerman would reschedule for the afternoon,” Hannah says, talking half to herself.

“You’ve actually never tasted it?” he asks, picking up the bishop again and waving it ominously towards her side of the board.

“No,” she replies, too busy now wondering if the photographer will rearrange his Tuesday schedule on her behalf to be annoyed at Peter’s cat and mouse with her rook.

“Dreadful stuff,” he says and makes a face like a kid tasting Brussels sprouts or Pepto-Bismol for the first time. “Might as well have a big glass of black jelly beans and cheap vodka, if you ask me. *La Fée Verte*, my fat ass.”

“Your ass isn’t fat, you skinny old queen,” Hannah scowls playfully, reaching quickly across the table and snatching the bishop from Peter’s hand. He doesn’t resist. This isn’t the first time she’s grown too tired of waiting for him to move to wait any longer. She removes her white rook off the board and sets the black bishop in its place.

“That’s suicide, dear,” Peter says, shaking his head and frowning. “You’re aware of that, yes?”

“You know those animals that *bore* their prey into submission?”

“No, I don’t believe I’ve ever heard of them before.”

“Then maybe you should get out more often.”

“Maybe I should,” he replies, setting the captured rook down with all the other prisoners he’s taken. “So, are you going to do the party? It’s a quick grand, you ask me.”

“That’s easy for you say. You’re not the one who’ll be getting naked for a bunch of drunken strangers.”

“A fact for which we should *all* be forevermore and eternally grateful.”

“You have his number?” she asks, giving in, because that’s almost a whole month’s rent in one night and, after her last gallery show, beggars can’t be choosers.

“There’s a smart girl,” Peter says and takes another drag off his cigarette. “The number’s on my desk somewhere. Remind me again before you leave. Your move.”

3.

“How old were you when that happened, when your sister died?” the psychologist asks, Dr. Edith Valloton and her smartly-cut hair so black it always makes Hannah think of fresh tar, or old tar gone deadly soft again beneath a summer sun to lay a trap for unwary, crawling things. Someone she sees when the nightmares get bad, which is whenever the painting isn’t going well or the modeling jobs aren’t coming in or both. Someone she can tell her secrets to who has to *keep* them secret, someone who listens as long as she pays by the hour, a place to turn when faith runs out and priests are just another bad memory to be confessed.

“Almost twelve,” Hannah tells her and watches while Edith Valloton scribbles a note on her yellow legal pad.

“Do you remember if you’d begun menstruating yet?”

“Yeah. My periods started right after my eleventh birthday.”

“And these dreams, and the stones. This is something you’ve never told anyone?”

“I tried to tell my mother once.”

“She didn’t believe you?”

Hannah coughs into her hand and tries not to smile, that bitter, wry smile to give away things she didn’t come here to show.

“She didn’t even *hear* me,” she says.

“Did you try more than once to tell her about the fairies?”

“I don’t think so. Mom was always pretty good at letting us know whenever she didn’t want to hear what was being said. You learned not to waste your breath.”

“Your sister’s death, you’ve said before that it’s something she was never able to come to terms with.”

“She never tried. Whenever my father tried, or I tried, she treated us like traitors. Like we were the ones who put Judith in her grave. Or like we were the ones *keeping* her there.”

“If she couldn’t face it, Hannah, then I’m sure it did seem that way to her.”

“So, no,” Hannah says, annoyed that she’s actually paying someone to sympathize with her mother. “No. I guess never really told anyone about it.”

“But you think you want to tell me now?” the psychologist asks and sips her bottled water, never taking her eyes off Hannah.

“You said to talk about all the nightmares, all the things I think are nightmares. It’s the only one that I’m not sure about.”

“Not sure if it’s a nightmare, or not sure if it’s even a dream?”

“Well, I always thought I was awake. For years, it never once occurred to me I might have only been dreaming.”

Edith Valloton watches her silently for a moment, her cat-calm, cat-smirk face, unreadable, too well trained to let whatever’s behind those dark eyes slip and show. Too detached to be smug, too concerned to be indifferent. Sometimes, Hannah thinks she might be a dyke, but maybe that’s only because the friend who recommended her is a lesbian.

“Do you still have the stones?” the psychologist asks, finally, and Hannah shrugs out of habit.

“Somewhere, probably. I never throw anything away. They might be up at Dad’s place, for all I know. A bunch of my shit’s still up there, stuff

from when I was a kid."

"But you haven't tried to find them?"

"I'm not sure I *want* to."

"When is the last time you saw them, the last time you can remember having seen them?"

And Hannah has to stop and think, chews intently at a stubby thumbnail and watches the clock on the psychologist's desk, the second hand traveling round and round and round. Seconds gone for pennies, nickels, dimes.

Hannah, this is the sort of thing you really ought to try to get straight ahead of time, she thinks in a voice that sounds more like Dr. Valloton's than her own thought-voice. *A waste of money, a waste of time…*

"You can't remember?" the psychologist asks and leans a little closer to Hannah.

"I kept them all in an old cigar box. I think my grandfather gave me the box. No, wait. He didn't. He gave it to Judith, and then I took it after the accident. I didn't think she'd mind."

"I'd like to see them someday, if you ever come across them again. Wouldn't that help you to know whether it was a dream or not, if the stones are real?"

"Maybe," Hannah mumbles around her thumb. "And maybe not."

"Why do you say that?"

"A thing like that, words scratched onto a handful of stones, it'd be easy for a kid to fake. I might have made them all myself. Or someone else might have made them, someone playing a trick on me. Anyone could have left them there."

"Did people do that often? Play tricks on you?"

"Not that I can recall. No more than usual."

Edith Valloton writes something else on her yellow pad and then checks the clock.

"You said that there were always stones after the dreams. Never before?"

"No, never before. Always after. They were always there the next day, always in the same place."

"At the old well," the psychologist says, like Hannah might have forgotten and needs reminding.

“Yeah, at the old well. Dad was always talking about doing something about it, before the accident, you know. Something besides a couple of sheets of corrugated tin to hide the hole. Afterwards, of course, the county ordered him to have the damned thing filled in.”

“Did your mother blame him for the accident, because he never did anything about the well?”

“My mother blamed *everyone*. She blamed him. She blamed me. She blamed whoever had dug that hole in the first goddamn place. She blamed God for putting water underground so people would dig wells to get at it. Believe me, Mom had blame down to an art.”

And again, the long pause, the psychologist’s measured consideration, quiet moments she plants like seeds to grow ever deeper revelations.

“Hannah, I want you to try to remember the word that was on the first stone you found. Can you do that?”

“That’s easy. It was *follow*.”

“And do you also know what was written on the last one, the very last one that you found?”

And this time she has to think, but only for a moment.

“*Fall*,” she says. “The last one said *fall*.”

4.

Half a bottle of Mari Mayans borrowed from an unlikely friend of Peter’s, a goth chick who DJs at a club that Hannah’s never been to because Hannah doesn’t go to clubs. Doesn’t dance and has always been more or less indifferent to both music and fashion. The goth chick works days at Trash and Vaudeville on St. Mark’s, selling Doc Martens and blue hair dye only a couple of blocks from the address on the card that Peter gave her. The place where the party is being held. *La Fête de la Fée Verte,* according to the small white card, the card with the phone number. She’s already made the call, has already agreed to be there, seven o’clock sharp, seven on the dot, and everything that’s expected of her has been explained in detail, twice.

Hannah’s sitting on the floor beside her bed, a couple of vanilla-scented candles burning because she feels obligated to make at least half a half-hearted effort at atmosphere. Obligatory show of respect for mystique that doesn’t interest her, but she’s gone to the trouble to borrow the bottle of liqueur; the bottle passed to her in a brown paper bag at the boutique, anything but inconspicuous, and the girl glared out at her, cautious from

beneath lids so heavy with shades of black and purple that Hannah was amazed the girl could open her eyes.

“So, you’re supposed to be a friend of Peter’s?” the girl asked suspiciously.

“Yeah, supposedly” Hannah replied, accepting the package, feeling vaguely, almost pleasurably illicit. “We’re chess buddies.”

“A painter,” the girl said.

“Most of the time.”

“Peter’s a cool old guy. He made bail for my boyfriend once, couple of years back.”

“Really? Yeah, he’s wonderful,” and Hannah glanced nervously at the customers browsing the racks of leather handbags and corsets, then at the door and the bright daylight outside.

“You don’t have to be so jumpy. It’s not illegal to have absinthe. It’s not even illegal to drink it. It’s only illegal to import it, which you didn’t do. So don’t sweat it.”

Hannah nodded, wondering if the girl was telling the truth, if she knew what she was talking about. “What do I owe you?” she asked.

“Oh, nothing,” the girl replied. “You’re a friend of Peter’s, and, besides, I get it cheap from someone over in Jersey. Just bring back whatever you don’t drink.”

And now Hannah twists the cap off the bottle, and the smell of odor is so strong, so immediate, she can smell it before she even raises the bottle to her nose. *Black jelly beans,* she thinks, just like Peter said, and that’s something else she never cared for. As a little girl, she’d set the black ones aside – and the pink ones too – saving them for her sister. Her sister had liked the black ones.

She has a wine glass, one from an incomplete set she bought last Christmas, secondhand, and she has a box of sugar cubes, a decanter filled with filtered tap water, a spoon from her mother’s mismatched antique silverware. She pours the absinthe, letting it drip slowly from the bottle until the fluorescent yellow-green liquid has filled the bottom of the glass. Then Hannah balances the spoon over the mouth of the goblet and places one of the sugar cubes in the tarnished bowl of the spoon. She remembers watching Gary Oldman and Winona Ryder doing this in *Dracula,* remembers seeing the movie with a boyfriend who eventually left her for

another man, and the memory and all its associations are enough to make her stop and sit staring at the glass for a moment.

"This is so fucking silly," she says, but part of her, the part that feels guilty for taking jobs that pay the bills, but have nothing to do with painting, the part that's always busy rationalizing and justifying the way she spends her time, assures her it's a sort of research. A new experience, horizon-broadening something to expand her mind's eye, and, for all she knows, it might lead her art somewhere it needs to go.

"Bullshit," she whispers, frowning down at the entirely uninviting glass of Spanish absinthe. She's been reading *Absinthe: History in a Bottle* and *Artists and Absinthe*, accounts of Van Gogh and Rimbaud, Oscar Wilde and Paul Marie Verlaine and their various relationships with this foul-smelling liqueur. She's never had much respect for artists who use this or that drug as a crutch and then call it their muse; heroin, cocaine, pot, booze, what-the-hell-ever, all the same shit as far as she's concerned. An excuse, an inability in the artist to hold himself accountable for his *own* art, a lazy cop-out, as useless as the idea of the muse itself. And *this* drug, this drug in particular, so tied up with art and inspiration there's even a Renoir painting decorating the Mari Mayans label, or at least it's something that's supposed to *look* like a Renoir.

But you've gone to all this trouble. Hell, you may as well taste it, at least. Just a taste*, to satisfy curiosity, to see what all the fuss is about.*

Hannah sets the bottle down and picks up the decanter, pouring water over the spoon, over the sugar cube. The absinthe louches quickly to an opalescent, milky white-green. Then she puts the decanter back on the floor and stirs the half-dissolved sugar into the glass, sets the spoon aside on a china saucer.

"Enjoy the ride," the goth girl said as Hannah walked out of the shop. "She's a blast."

Hannah raises the glass to her lips, sniffs at it, wrinkling her nose, and the first, hesitant sip is even sweeter and more piquant than she expected, sugar-soft fire when she swallows, a seventy-proof flower blooming hot in her belly. But the taste not nearly as disagreeable as she'd thought it would be, the sudden licorice and alcohol sting, a faint bitterness underneath that she guesses might be the wormwood. The second sip is less of a shock, especially since her tongue seems to have gone slightly numb.

She opens *Absinthe: History in a Bottle* again, opening the book at random, and there's a full-page reproduction of Albert Maignan's *The Green Muse.* A blonde woman with marble skin, golden hair, wrapped in diaphanous folds of olive, her feet hovering weightless above bare floorboards, her hands caressing the forehead of an intoxicated poet. The man is gaunt and seems lost in some ecstasy or revelry or simple delirium, his right hand clawing at his face, the other hand open in what might have been meant as a feeble attempt to ward off the attentions of his unearthly companion. *Or,* Hannah thinks, *perhaps he's reaching for something.* There's a shattered green bottle on the floor at his feet, a full glass of absinthe on his writing desk.

Hannah takes another sip and turns the page.

A photograph, Verlaine drinking absinthe in the Café Procope.

Another, bolder swallow, and the taste is becoming familiar now, almost, *almost* pleasant.

Another page. Jean Béraud's *Le Boulevard, La Nuit.*

When the glass is empty, and the buzz in her head, behind her eyes is so gentle, buzz like a stinging insect wrapped in spider silk and honey, Hannah takes another sugar cube from the box and pours another glass.

5.

"Fairies.

'Fairy crosses.'

Harper's Weekly, 50 – 715:

That, near the point where the Blue Ridge and the Allegheny Mountains unite, north of Patrick County, Virginia, many little stone crosses have been found.

A race of tiny beings.

They crucified cockroaches.

Exquisite beings – but the cruelty of the exquisite. In their diminutive way they were human beings. They crucified.

The 'fairy crosses,' we are told in *Harper's Weekly,* range in weight from one-quarter of an ounce to an ounce: but it is said, in the *Scientific American,* 79 – 395, that some of them are no larger than the head of a pin.

They have been found in two other states, but all

in Virginia are strictly localized on and along Bull Mountain…

…I suppose they fell there."

Charles Fort, *The Book of the Damned* (1919)

6.

In the dream, which is never the same thing twice, not precisely, Hannah is twelve years old and standing at her bedroom window watching the backyard. It's almost dark, the last rays of twilight, and there are chartreuse fireflies dappling the shadows, already a few stars twinkling in the high indigo sky, the call of a whippoorwill from the woods nearby.

Another whippoorwill answers.

And the grass is moving. The grass grown so tall because her father never bothers to mow it anymore. It could be wind, only there is no wind; the leaves in the trees are all perfectly, silently still, and no limb swaying, no twig, no leaves rustling in even the stingiest breeze. Only the grass.

It's probably just a cat, she thinks. *A cat, or a skunk, or a raccoon.*

The bedroom has grown very dark, and she wants to turn on a lamp, afraid of the restless grass even though she knows it's only some small animal, awake for the night and hunting, taking a short cut across their backyard. She looks over her shoulder, meaning to ask Judith to please turn on a lamp, but there's only the dark room, Judith's empty bunk, and she remembers it all again. It's always like the very first time she heard, the surprise and disbelief and pain always that fresh, the numbness that follows that absolute.

"Have you seen your sister?" her mother asks from the open bedroom door. There's so much night pooled there that she can't make out anything but her mother's softly glowing eyes the soothing color of amber beads, two cat-slit pupils swollen wide against the gloom.

"No, Mom," Hannah tells her, and there's a smell in the room then like burning leaves.

"She shouldn't be out so late on a school night."

"No, Mom, she shouldn't," and the eleven-year-old Hannah is amazed at the thirty-five-year-old's voice coming from her mouth. The thirty-five-year-old Hannah remembers how clear, how unburdened by time and sorrow, the eleven-year-old Hannah's voice could be.

"You should look for her," her mother says.

"I always do. That comes later."

"Hannah, have you seen your sister?"

Outside, the grass has begun to swirl, rippling round and round upon itself, and there's the faintest green glow dancing a few inches above the ground.

The fireflies, she thinks, though she knows it's not the fireflies, the way she knows it's not a cat, or a skunk, or a raccoon making the grass move.

"Your father should have seen to that damned well," her mother mutters, and the burning leaves smell grows a little stronger. "He should have done something about that years ago."

"Yes, Mom, he should have. You should have made him."

"No," her mother replies angrily. "This is not my fault. None of it's my fault."

"No, of course it's not."

"When we bought this place, I told him to see to that well. I *told* him it was dangerous."

"You were right," Hannah says, watching the grass, the softly pulsing cloud of green light hanging above it. The light is still only about as big as a basketball. Later, it'll get a lot bigger. She can hear the music now, pipes and drums and fiddles, like a song from one of her father's albums of folk music.

"Hannah, have you seen your sister?"

Hannah turns and stares defiantly back at her mother's glowing, accusing eyes.

"That makes three, Mom. Now you have to leave. Sorry, but them's the rules," and her mother does leave, that obedient phantom fading slowly away with a sigh, a flicker, a half second when the darkness seems to bend back upon itself, and she takes the burning leaves smell with her.

The light floating above the backyard grows brighter, reflecting dully off the windowpane, off Hannah's skin and the room's white walls. The music rises to meet the light's challenge.

Peter's standing beside her now, and she wants to hold his hand, but doesn't, because she's never quite sure if he's supposed to be in this dream.

"I am the Green Fairy," he says, sounding tired and older than he is, sounding sad. "My robe is the color of despair."

"No," she says. "You're only Peter Mulligan. You write books about places you've never been and people who will never be born."

"You shouldn't keep coming here," he whispers, the light from the backyard shining in his grey eyes, tinting them to moss and ivy.

“Nobody else does. Nobody else ever could.”

“That doesn’t mean – ”

But he stops and stares speechlessly at the backyard.

“I should try to find Judith,” Hannah says. “She shouldn’t be out so late on a school night.”

“That painting you did last winter,” Peter mumbles, mumbling like he’s drunk or only half awake. “The pigeons on your windowsill, looking in.”

“That wasn’t me. You’re thinking of someone else.”

“I hated that damned painting. I was glad when you sold it.”

“So was I,” Hannah says. “I should try to find her now, Peter. My sister. It’s almost time for dinner.”

“I am ruin and sorrow,” he whispers.

And now the green light is spinning very fast, throwing off gleaming flecks of itself to take up the dance, to swirl about their mother star, little worlds newborn, whole universes, and she could hold them all in the palm of her right hand.

“What I need,” Peter says, “is blood, red and hot, the palpitating flesh of my victims.”

“Jesus, Peter, that’s purple even for you,” and Hannah reaches out and lets her fingers brush the glass. It’s warm, like the spring evening, like her mother’s glowing eyes.

“I didn’t write it,” he says.

“And I never painted pigeons.”

She presses her fingers against the glass and isn’t surprised when it shatters, explodes, and the sparkling diamond blast is blown inward, tearing her apart, shredding the dream until it’s only unconscious, fitful sleep.

7.

“I wasn’t in the mood for this,” Hannah says and sets the paper saucer with three greasy, uneaten cubes of orange cheese and a couple of Ritz crackers down on one corner of a convenient table. The table is crowded with fliers about other shows, other openings at other galleries. She glances at Peter and then at the long white room and the canvases on the walls.

“I thought it would do you good to get out. You never go anywhere anymore.”

“I come to see you.”

“My point exactly, dear.”

Hannah sips at her plastic cup of warm merlot, wishing she had a beer instead.

“And you said that you liked Perrault’s work.”

“Yeah,” she says. “I’m just not sure I’m up for it tonight. I’ve been feeling pretty morbid lately, all on my own.”

“That’s generally what happens to people who swear off sex.”

“Peter, I didn’t *swear off* anything.”

And she follows him on their first slow circuit around the room, small talk with people that she hardly knows or doesn’t want to know at all, people who know Peter better than they know her, people whose opinions matter and people whom she wishes she’d never met. She smiles and nods her head, sips her wine, and tries not to look too long at any of the huge, dark canvases spaced out like oil and acrylic windows on a train.

“He’s trying to bring us down, down to the very core of those old stories,” a woman named Rose tells Peter. She owns a gallery somewhere uptown, the sort of place where Hannah’s paintings will never hang. “‘Little Red Riding Hood,’ ‘Snow White,’ ‘Hansel and Gretel,’ all those old fairy tales,” Rose says. “It’s a very post-Freudian approach.”

“Indeed,” Peter says. *As if he agrees*, Hannah thinks, *as if he even cares*, when she knows damn well he doesn’t.

“How’s the new novel coming along?” Rose asks him.

“Like a mouthful of salted thumbtacks,” he replies, and she laughs.

Hannah turns and looks at the nearest painting, because it’s easier than listening to the woman and Peter pretend to enjoy one another’s company. A somber storm of blacks and reds and greys, dappled chaos struggling to resolve itself into images, images stalled at the very edge of perception. She thinks she remembers having seen a photo of this canvas in *Artforum*.

A small beige card on the wall to the right of the painting identifies it as *Night in the Forest.* There isn’t a price, because none of Perrault’s paintings are ever for sale. She’s heard rumors that he’s turned down millions, tens of millions, but suspects that’s all exaggeration and PR. Urban legends for modern artists, and from the other things that she’s heard he doesn’t need the money, anyway.

Rose says something about the exploration of possibility and fairy tales and children using them to avoid any *real* danger, something that Hannah’s pretty sure she’s lifted directly from Bruno Bettelheim.

“Me, I was always rooting for the wolf,” Peter says, “or the wicked witch or the three bears or whatever. I never much saw the point in rooting for silly girls too thick not to go wandering about alone in the woods.”

Hannah laughs softly, laughing to herself, and takes a step back from the painting, squinting at it. A moonless sky pressing cruelly down upon a tangled, writhing forest, a path and something waiting in the shadows, stooped shoulders, ribsy, a calculated smudge of scarlet that could be its eyes. There’s no one on the path, but the implication is clear – there will be, soon enough, and the thing crouched beneath the trees is patient.

“Have you seen the stones yet?” Rose asks and no, Peter replies, no we haven’t.

“They’re a new direction for him,” she says. “This is only the second time they’ve been exhibited.”

If I could paint like that, Hannah thinks, *I could tell Dr. Valloton to kiss my ass. If I could paint like that, it would be an exorcism.*

And then Rose leads them both to a poorly-lit corner of the gallery, to a series of rusted wire cages, and inside each one is a single stone. Large pebbles or small cobbles, stream-worn slate and granite, and each stone has been crudely engraved with a single word.

The first one reads “follow.”

“Peter, I need to go now,” Hannah says, unable to look away from the yellow-brown stone, the word tattooed on it, and she doesn’t dare let her eyes wander ahead to the next one.

“Are you sick?”

“I need to go, that’s all. I need to go *now*.”

“If you’re not feeling well,” the woman named Rose says, trying too hard to be helpful, “there’s a restroom in the back.”

“No, I’m fine. Really. I just need some air.”

And Peter puts an arm protectively around her, reciting his hurried, polite goodbyes to Rose. But Hannah still can’t look away from the stone, sitting there behind the wire like a small and vicious animal at the zoo.

“Good luck with the book,” Rose says and smiles, and Hannah’s beginning to think she is going to be sick, that she will have to make a dash for the toilet, after all. there’s a taste like foil in her mouth, and her heart like a mallet on dead and frozen beef, adrenaline, the first eager tug of vertigo.

“It was good to meet you, Hannah,” the woman says. Hannah manages to smile, manages to nod her head.

And then Peter leads her quickly back through the crowded gallery, out onto the sidewalk and the warm night spread out along Mercer Street.

8.

“Would you like to talk about that day at the well?” Dr. Valloton asks, and Hannah bites at her chapped lower lip.

“No. Not now,” she says. “Not again.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’ve already told you everything I can remember.”

“If they’d found her body,” the psychologist says, “perhaps you and your mother and father would have been able to move on. There could have at least been some sort of closure. There wouldn’t have been that lingering hope that maybe someone would find her, that maybe she was alive.”

Hannah sighs loudly, looking at the clock for release, but there’s still almost half an hour to go.

“Judith fell down the well and drowned,” she says.

“But they never found the body.”

“No, but they found enough, enough to be sure. She fell down the well. She drowned. It was very deep.”

“You said you heard her calling you.”

“I’m not sure,” Hannah says, interrupting the psychologist before she can say the things she was going to say next, before she can use Hannah’s own words against her. “I’ve never been absolutely sure. I told you that.”

“I’m sorry if it seems like I’m pushing,” Dr. Valloton says.

“I just don’t see any reason to talk about it again.”

“Then let’s talk about the dreams, Hannah. Let’s talk about the day you saw the fairies.”

9.

The dreams, or the day from which the dreams would arise and, half-forgotten, seek always to return. The dreams or the day itself, the one or the other, it makes very little difference. The mind exists only in a moment, always, a single flickering moment, remembered or actual, dreaming or awake or something liminal between the two, the precious, treacherous illusion of Present floundering in the crack between Past and Future.

The dream of the day – or the day itself – and the sun is high and small and white, a dazzling July sun coming down in shafts through the tall trees in the woods behind Hannah's house. She's running to catch up with Judith, her sister two years older and her legs grown longer, always leaving Hannah behind. *You can't catch me, slowpoke. You can't even keep up.* Hannah almost trips in a tangle of creeper vines and has to stop long enough to free her left foot.

"Wait up!" she shouts, and Judith doesn't answer. "I want to see. Wait for me!"

The vines try to pull one of Hannah's tennis shoes off and leave bright beads of blood on her ankle. But she's loose again in only a moment, running down the narrow path to catch up, running through the summer sun and the oak-leaf shadows.

"I found something," Judith said to her that morning after breakfast. The two of them sitting on the back porch steps. "Down in the clearing by the old well," she said.

"What? What did you find?"

"Oh, I don't think I should tell you. No, I *definitely* shouldn't tell you. You might go and tell Mom and Dad. You might spoil everything."

"No, I wouldn't. I wouldn't tell them anything. I wouldn't tell anyone."

"Yes, you would, big mouth."

And, finally, she gave Judith half her allowance to tell, half to be shown whatever there was to see. Her sister dug deep down into the pockets of her jeans, and her hand came back up with a shiny black pebble.

"I just gave you a whole dollar to show me a *rock*?"

"No, stupid. *Look* at it," and Judith held out her hand.

The letters scratched deep into the stone – JVDTH – five crooked letters that almost spelled her sister's name, and Hannah didn't have to pretend not to be impressed.

"Wait for me!" she shouts again, angry now, her voice echoing around the trunks of the old trees and dead leaves crunching beneath her shoes. Starting to guess that the whole thing is a trick after all, just one of Judith's stunts, and her sister's probably watching her from a hiding place right this very second, snickering quietly to herself. Hannah stops running and stands in the center of the path, listening to the murmuring forest sounds around her.

And something faint and lilting that might be music.

“That’s not all,” Judith said. “But you have to *swear* you won’t tell Mom and Dad.”

“I swear.”

“If you do tell, well, I *promise* I’ll make you wish you hadn’t.”

“I won’t tell anyone *anything*.”

“Give it back,” Judith said, and Hannah immediately handed the black stone back to her. “If you *do* tell – ”

“I already said I won’t. How many times do I have to say I won’t tell?”

“Well then,” Judith said and led her around to the back of the little tool shed where their father kept his hedge clippers and bags of fertilizer and the old lawnmowers he liked to take apart and try to put back together again.

“This better be *worth* a dollar,” Hannah said.

She stands very, very still and listens to the music, growing louder. She thinks it’s coming from the clearing up ahead.

“I’m going back home, Judith!” she shouts, not a bluff because suddenly she doesn’t care whether or not the thing in the jar was real, and the sun doesn’t seem as warm as it did only a moment ago.

And the music keeps getting louder.

And louder.

And Judith took an empty mayonnaise jar out of the empty rabbit hutch behind the tool shed. She held it up to the sun, smiling at whatever was inside.

“Let me see,” Hannah said.

“Maybe I should make you give me another dollar first,” her sister replied, smirking, not looking away from the jar.

“No way,” Hannah said indignantly. “Not a snowball’s chance in Hell,” and she grabbed for the jar, then, but Judith was faster, and her hand closed around nothing at all.

In the woods, Hannah turns and looks back towards home, then turns back towards the clearing again, waiting for her just beyond the trees.

“Judith! This isn’t funny! I’m going home right this second!”

Her heart is almost as loud as the music now. Almost. Not quite, but close enough. Pipes and fiddles, drums and a jingle like tambourines.

Hannah takes another step towards the clearing, because it’s nothing at all but her sister trying to scare her. Which is stupid, because it’s broad

daylight, and Hannah knows these woods like the back of her hand.

Judith unscrewed the lid of the mayonnaise jar and held it out so Hannah could see the small, dry thing curled in a lump at the bottom. Tiny mummy husk of a thing, grey and crumbling in the morning light.

“It’s just a damn dead mouse,” Hannah said disgustedly. “I gave you a whole dollar to see a rock and a dead mouse in a jar?”

“It’s *not* a mouse, stupid. Look closer.”

And so she did, bending close enough that she could see the perfect dragonfly wings on its back, transparent, iridescent wings that glimmer faintly in the sun. Hannah squinted and realized that she could see its face, realized that it *had* a face.

“Oh,” she said, looking quickly up at her sister, who was grinning triumphantly. “Oh, Judith. Oh my god. What is it?”

“Don’t you know?” Judith asked her. “Do I have to tell you everything?”

Hannah picks her way over the deadfall just before the clearing, the place where the path through the woods disappears beneath a jumble of fallen, rotting logs. There was a house back here, her father said, a long, long time ago. Nothing left but a big pile of rocks where the chimney once stood, and also the well covered over with sheets of rusted corrugated tin. There was a fire, her father said, and everyone in the house died.

On the other side of the deadfall, Hannah takes a deep breath and steps out into the daylight, leaving the tree shadows behind, forfeiting her last chance not to see.

“Isn’t it cool,” Judith said. “Isn’t it the coolest thing you ever seen?”

Someone’s pushed aside the sheets of tin, and the well is so dark that even the sun won’t go there. And then Hannah sees the wide ring of mushrooms, the perfect circle of toadstools and red caps and spongy brown morels growing round the well. The heat shimmers off the tin, dancing mirage shimmer as though the air here is turning to water, and the music is very loud now.

“I found it,” Judith whispered, screwing the top back onto the jar as tightly as she could. “I found it, and I’m going to keep it. And you’ll keep your mouth shut about it, or I’ll never, *ever* show you anything else again.”

Hannah looks up from the mushrooms, from the open well, and there are a thousand eyes watching her from the edges of the clearing. Eyes like indigo berries and rubies and drops of honey, like gold and silver coins,

eyes like fire and ice, eyes like seething dabs of midnight. Eyes filled with hunger beyond imagining, neither good nor evil, neither real nor impossible.

Something the size of a bear, squatting in the shade of a poplar tree, raises its shaggy charcoal head and smiles.

"That's another pretty one," it growls.

And Hannah turns and runs.

10.

"But you *know*, in your soul, what you must have really seen that day," Dr. Valloton says and taps the eraser end of her pencil lightly against her front teeth. There's something almost obscenely earnest in her expression, Hannah thinks, in the steady *tap, tap, tap* of the pencil against her perfectly spaced, perfectly white incisors. "You saw your sister fall into the well, or you realized that she just had. You may have heard her calling out for help."

"Maybe I *pushed* her in," Hannah whispers.

"Is that what you *think* happened?"

"No," Hannah says and rubs at her temples, trying to massage away the first dim throb of an approaching headache. "But, most of the time, I'd rather *believe* that's what happened."

"Because you *think* it would be easier than what you remember."

"Isn't it? Isn't easier to believe she pissed me off that day, and so I shoved her in? That I made up these crazy stories so I'd never have to feel guilty for what I'd done? Maybe that's what the nightmares are, my conscience trying to fucking force me to come clean."

"And what are the stones, then?"

"Maybe I put them all there myself. Maybe I scratched those words on them myself and hid them there for me to find, because I knew that would make it easier for me to believe. If there was something that real, that tangible, something solid to remind me of the story, that the story is supposed to be the truth."

A long moment that's almost silence, just the clock on the desk ticking and the pencil tapping against the psychologist's teeth. Hannah rubs harder at her temples, the real pain almost within sight now, waiting for her just a little ways past this moment or the next, vast and absolute, deep purple shot through with veins of red and black. Finally, Dr. Valloton lays her pencil down and takes a deep breath.

“Is this a confession, Hannah?” she asks, and the obscene earnestness is dissolving into something that may be eager anticipation, or simple clinical curiosity, or only dread. “Did you kill your sister?”

And Hannah shakes her head and shuts her eyes tight.

“Judith fell into the well,” she says calmly. “She moved the tin, and got too close to the edge. The sheriff showed my parents where a little bit of the ground had collapsed under her weight. She fell into the well, and she drowned.”

“Who are you trying so hard to convince? Me or yourself?”

“Do you really think it matters?” Hannah replies, matching a question with a question, tit for tat.

“Yes,” Dr. Valloton says. “Yes, I do. You need to know the truth.”

“Which one?” Hannah asks, smiling against the pain swelling behind her eyes, and this time the psychologist doesn’t bother answering, lets her sit silently with her eyes shut until the clock decides her hour’s up..

11.

Peter Mulligan picks up a black pawn and moves it ahead two squares; Hannah removes it from the board with a white knight. He isn’t even trying today, and that always annoys her. Peter pretends to be surprised that’s he’s lost another piece, then pretends to frown and think about his next move while he talks.

“In Russian,” he says, “*chernobyl* is the word for wormwood. Did Kellerman give you a hard time?”

“No,” Hannah says. “No, he didn’t. In fact, he said he’d actually rather do the shoot in the afternoon. So everything’s jake, I guess.”

“Small miracles,” Peter sighs, picking up a rook and setting it back down again. “So you’re doing the anthropologist’s party?”

“Yeah,” she replies. “I’m doing the anthropologist’s party.”

“*Monsieur* Ordinaire. You think he was born with that name?”

“I think I couldn’t give a damn, as long as his check doesn’t bounce. A thousand dollars to play dress-up for a few hours. I’d be a fool not to do the damned party.”

Peter picks the rook up again and dangles it in the air above the board, teasing her. “Oh, his book,” he says. “I remembered the title the other day. But then I forgot it all over again. Anyway, it was something on shamanism and shapeshifters, werewolves and masks, that sort of thing. It sold a lot of

copies in ’68, then vanished from the face of the earth. You could probably find out something about it online.” Peter sets the rook down and starts to take his hand away.

“Don’t,” she says. “That’ll be check mate.”

“You could at least let me *lose* on my own, dear,” he scowls, pretending to be insulted.

“Yeah, well, I’m not ready to go home yet.” Hannah replies, and Peter Mulligan goes back to dithering over the chessboard and talking about Monsieur Ordinaire’s forgotten book. In a little while, she gets up to refill both their coffee cups, and there’s a single black and grey pigeon perched on the kitchen windowsill, staring in at her with its beady piss-yellow eyes. It almost reminds her of something she doesn’t want to be reminded of, and so she raps on the glass with her knuckles and frightens it away.

12.

The old woman named Jackie never comes for her. There’s a young boy, instead, fourteen or fifteen, sixteen at the most, his nails polished poppy red to match his rouged lips, and he’s dressed in peacock feathers and silk. He opens the door and stands there, very still, watching her, waiting wordlessly. Something like awe on his smooth face, and for the first time Hannah doesn’t just feel nude, she feels *naked.*

“Are they ready for me now?” she asks him, trying to sound no more than half as nervous as she is, and then turns her head to steal a last glance at the green fairy in the tall mahogany mirror. But the mirror is empty. There’s no one there at all, neither her nor the green woman, nothing but the dusty backroom full of antiques, the pretty hard-candy lamps, the peeling cranberry wallpaper.

“My Lady,” the boy says in a voice like broken crystal shards, and then he curtsies. “The Court is waiting to receive you, at your ready.” He steps to one side, to let her pass, and the music from the party grows suddenly very loud, changing tempo, the rhythm assuming a furious speed as a thousand notes and drumbeats tumble and boom and chase one another’s tails.

“The mirror,” Hannah whispers, pointing at it, at the place where her reflection should be, and when she turns back to the boy there’s a young girl standing there, instead, dressed in his feathers and make-up. She could be his twin.

“It’s a small thing, My Lady,” she says with the boy’s sparkling, shattered tongue.

“What’s happening?”

“The Court is assembled,” the girl child says. “They are all waiting. Don’t be afraid, My lady. I will show you the way.”

The path, the path through the woods to the well. The path down to the well…

“Do you have a name?” Hannah asks, surprised at the calm in her voice; all the embarrassment and unease at standing naked before this child, and the one before, the boy twin, the fear at what she didn’t see gazing back at her in the looking glass, all of that gone now.

“My name? I’m not such a fool as that, My Lady.”

“No, of course not,” Hannah replies. “I’m sorry.”

“I will show you the way,” the child says again. “Never harm, nor spell, nor charm, come our Lady nigh.”

“That’s very kind of you,” Hannah replies. “I was beginning to think that I was lost. But I’m not lost, am I?”

“No, My Lady. You are here.”

“Yes. Yes, I *am* here, aren’t I?” and the child smiles for her, showing off its sharp crystal teeth. Hannah smiles back, and then she leaves the dusty backroom and the mahogany mirror, following the child down a short hallway; the music has filled in all the vacant corners of her skull, the music and the heavy living-dying smells of wildflowers and fallen leaves, rotting stumps and fresh-turned earth. A riotous hothouse cacophony of odors – spring to fall, summer to winter – and she’s never tasted air so violently sweet.

…the path down the well, and the still black water at the bottom.

Hannah, can you hear me? Hannah?

It’s so cold down here. I can’t see…

At the end of the hall, just past the stairs leading back down to St. Mark’s, there’s a green door, and the girl opens it. Green gets you out.

And all the things in the wide, wide room – the unlikely room that stretches so far away in every direction that it could never be contained in any building, not in a thousand buildings – the scampering, hopping, dancing, spinning, flying, skulking things, each and every one of them stops and stares at her. And Hannah knows that she ought to be frightened of them, that she should turn and run from this place. But it’s really nothing

she hasn’t seen before, a long time ago, and she steps past the child (who is a boy again) as the wings on her back begin to thrum like the frantic, iridescent wings of bumblebees and hummingbirds, red wasps and hungry dragonflies. Her mouth tastes of anise and wormwood, sugar and hyssop and melissa. Sticky verdant light spills from her skin and pools in the grass and moss at her bare feet.

Sink or swim, and so easy to imagine the icy black well water closing thickly over her sister’s face, filling her mouth, slipping up her nostrils, flooding her belly, as clawed hands dragged her down.

And down.

And down.

And sometimes, Dr. Valloton says, sometimes we spend our entire lives just trying to answer one simple question.

The music is a hurricane, swallowing her.

My Lady. Lady of the Bottle. *Artemisia absinthium,* Chernobyl, *apsinthion*, Lady of Waking Dreaming, Green Lady of Elation and Melancholy.

I am ruin and sorrow.

My robe is the color of despair.

They bow, all of them, and Hannah finally sees the thing waiting for her on its prickling throne of woven branches and birds’ nests, the hulking antlered thing with blazing eyes, that wolf-jawed hart, the man and the stag, and she bows, in her turn.

La Peau Verte

Another story that received much more attention than I’d expected it would, though I never did get the two bottles of Mari Mayans that were supposed to be part of my payment for having written it. I do still imbibe, though not as much as I once did. One of many responses to all those who would make of the *daoine sídhe* all white light and benevolence and “positive, healing energy.” Fuck that shit.

Riding the White Bull

“You’ve been drinking again, Mr. Paine,” Sarah said, and I suppose I must have stopped whatever it was I was doing, probably staring at those damned photographs again, the ones of the mess the cops had turned up that morning in a nasty little dump on Columbus – or maybe chewing at my fingernails, or thinking about sex. Whatever. Something or another that suddenly didn’t matter anymore because she wasn’t asking me a question. Sarah rarely had time for questions. She just wasn’t that sort of a girl anymore. She spoke with a directness and authority that would never match her pretty artificial face, and that dissonance, that absolute betrayal of expectation, always made people sit up and listen. If I’d been looking at the photos – I honestly can’t remember – if I was, I probably laid them down again and looked at her, instead.

“There are worse things,” I replied, which I suppose I thought was some sort of excuse or defense or something, but she only scowled at me and shook her head.

“Not for you there aren’t,” she whispered, speaking so low that I almost couldn’t make out the words over the faint hum of her metabolic servos and the rumble of traffic down on the street. She blinked and turned away, staring out my hotel window at the dark grey sky hanging low above the Hudson. The snow had finally stopped falling, and the clouds had an angry, interrupted intensity to them. Jesus. I can remember the fucking clouds, can even assign them human emotions, but I can’t remember what I was doing when Sarah told me I was drinking again. The bits we save, the bits we throw away. Go figure.

“The Agency doesn’t need drunks on its payroll, Mr. Paine. The streets of New York are full of drunks and junkies. They’re cheaper than rat shit. The Agency needs men with clear minds.”

Sarah had a way of enunciating words so that I knew they were capitalized. And she always capitalized Agency. Always. Maybe it was a glitch in one of her language programs, or, then again, maybe she just made me paranoid. Sarah and the booze and the fucking Agency and, while I’m on the subject, February in Manhattan. By that point, I think I’d have given up a couple of fingers and a toe to be on the next flight back to LA.

“We hired you because Fennimore said you were sober. We checked your records with the Department of – ”

“Why are you *here,* Sarah? What do you want? I have work to do,” and I jabbed a thumb at the cluttered desk on the other side of my unmade bed. “Work for you and the Agency.”

“Work you can’t do drunk.”

“Yeah, so why don’t you fire my worthless, intoxicated ass, and put me on the next jump back to Los Angeles? After this morning, I honestly couldn’t give a shit.”

“You understood, when you took this job, Mr. Paine, that there might be exceptional circumstances.”

She was still staring out the window towards the sludgy, ice-jammed river and Jersey, an almost expectant expression on her face, the sullen winter light reflecting dull and iridescent off her unaging synthetic skin.

“We were quite explicit on that point.”

“Of course you were,” I mumbled, half to myself, even less than half to the cyborg who still bothered to call herself Sarah, and then I stepped around the foot of the bed and sat down on a swivel-topped aluminum stool in front of the desk. I made a show of shuffling papers about, hoping that she’d take the hint and leave. I needed a drink and time alone, time to think about what the hell I was going to do next. After the things I’d seen and heard, the things in the photographs I’d taken, the things they wouldn’t *let* me photograph, I was beginning to understand why the Agency had decided not to call an alert on this one, why they were keeping the CDC and BioCon and the WHO in the dark. Why they’d called in a scrubber, instead.

“It’ll snow again before morning,” Sarah said, not turning away from the window.

“If you can call that crap out there snow,” I replied, impatiently. “It’s not even white. It smells like…fuck, I don’t know what it smells like, but it doesn’t smell like snow.”

“You have to learn to let go of the past, Mr. Paine. It’s no good to you here. No good at all.”

“Is that Agency policy?” I asked, and Sarah frowned.

“No, that’s not what I meant. That’s not what I meant at all.” She sighed then, and I wondered if it was just habit or if she still needed to breathe, still needed oxygen to drive the patchwork alchemy of her biomechs. I also wondered if she still had sex and, if so, with what. Sarah

and I had gone a few rounds, way back in the day, back when she was still one-hundred percent flesh and blood, water and bone and cartilage. Back when she was still scrubbing freelance, before the Agency gave her a contract and shipped her off to the great frozen dung heap of Manhattan. Back then, if anyone had asked, I'd have said it was her life, her decisions to make, and a girl like Sarah sure as fuck didn't need someone like me getting in her way.

"I was trying to say – here, now – we have to live in the present. That's all we have."

"Forget it," I told her, glancing up too quickly from the bloody, garish images flickering across the screen of my ancient Sony-Akamatsu pad. "Thanks for the ride, though."

"No problem," Sarah whispered. "It's what I do," and she finally turned away from the window, the frost on the Plexiglas, the wide interrupted sky.

"If I need anything, I'll give you or Templeton a ring," I said and Sarah pretended to smile, nodded her head and walked across the tiny room to the door. She opened it, but paused there, one foot across the threshold, neither in nor out, the heavy, cold air and flat fluorescent lighting from the hallway leaking in around her, swaddling her like a second-rate halo.

"Try to stay sober," she said. "Please. Mr. Paine. This on…it's going to be a squeeze." And her green-brown eyes shimmered faintly, those amazing eight-mill-a-pair spheres of fiber-optic filament and scratch-resistant acrylic, tinted mercury suspension-platinum lenses and the very best circuitry German optimetrics had figured out how to cram into a 6.5 cc socket. I imagined, then or only later on – that's something else I can't remember – that the shimmer stood for something Sarah was too afraid to say aloud, or something the Agency's behavioral inhibitors wouldn't allow her to say, something in her psyche that had been stamped Code Black, Restricted Access.

"Please," she said again.

"Sure. For old time's sake," I replied.

"Whatever it takes, Mr. Paine," and she left, pulling the door softly closed behind her, abandoning me to my dingy room and the dingier afternoon light leaking in through the single soot-streaked window. I listened to her footsteps on the tile, growing fainter as she approached the elevator at the other end of the hall, and when I was sure she wasn't coming

back, I reached for the half-empty bottle of scotch tucked into the shadows beneath the edge of the bed.

Back then, I still dreamed about Europa every fucking night. Years later, after I'd finally been retired by the Agency and was only Dietrich Paine again, pensioned civilian has-been rotting away day by day by day in East LA or NoHo or San Diego – I moved around a lot for a drunk – a friend of a friend's croaker hooked me up with some black-market head tweaker. And he slipped a tiny silver chip into the base of my skull, right next to my metencephalon, and the bad dreams stopped, just like that. No more night flights, no more cold sweats, no more screaming until the neighbors called the cops.

But that winter in Manhattan, I was still a long, long decade away from the tweaker and his magic silver chip, and whenever the insomnia failed me and I dozed off for ten or fifteen or twenty minutes, I was falling again, tumbling silently through the darkness out beyond Ganymede, falling towards that Great Red Spot, that eternal crimson hurricane, my perfect, vortical Hell of phosphorus-stained clouds. Always praying to whatever dark Jovian gods might be watching my descent that *this* time I'd sail clear of the moons and the anti-cyclone's eye would swallow me at last, dragging me down, burning me, crushing me in that vast abyss of gas and lightning and infinite pressure.

But I never made it. Not one single goddamn time.

"Do you believe in sin?" Sarah would ask me, when she was still just Sarah, before the implants and augmentations, and I would lie there in her arms, thinking that I was content, and stare up at the ceiling of our apartment and laugh at her.

"I'm serious, Deet."

"You're always serious. You've got serious down to an exact science."

"I think you're trying to avoid the question."

"Yeah, well, it's a pretty silly fucking question."

"Answer it anyway. Do you believe in sin?"

There's no way to know how fast I'm moving as I plummet towards the hungry, welcoming storm, and then Europa snags me. *Maybe next time,* I think. *Maybe next time.*

"It's only a question," Sarah would say. "Stop trying to make it anything more than that."

“Most of us get what’s coming to us, sooner or later.”

“That’s not the same thing. That’s not what I asked you.”

And the phone would ring, or I’d slip my hand between her unshaven legs, or one of our beepers would go off, and the moment would melt away, releasing me from her scrutiny.

It never happened exactly that way, of course, but who’s keeping score? In my dreams, Europa grows larger and larger, sprouting from the darkness exactly like it did in the fucking orientation vids every scrubber had to sit through in those days if he or she wanted a license. Snippets of video from this or that probe borrowed for my own memories. Endless fractured sheets of ice the color of rust and sandstone, rising up so fast, so fast, and I’m only a very small speck of meat and white EMU suit streaking north and east across the ebony skies above Mael Dúin, the Echion Linea, Cilix, the southeastern terminus of the Rhadamanthys Linea. I’m only a shooting star hurtling along above that terrible varicose landscape, and I can’t remember how to close my eyes.

“Man, I was right fucking there when they cracked the thing,” Ronnie says again and takes another drag off her cigarette. Her hand trembles and ash falls to the Formica tabletop. “I’d asked to go to Turkey, right, to cover the goddamn war, but I pulled the IcePIC assignment instead. I was waiting in the pressroom with everyone else, watching the feed from the quarantine unit when the sirens started.”

“The Agency denies you were present,” I reply as calmly as I can, and she smiles that nervous, brittle smile she always had, laughs one of her dry, humorless laughs, and grey smoke leaks from her nostrils.

“Hell, I know that, Deet. The fuckers keep rewriting history so it always comes out the way they want it to, but I was there, man. I *saw* it, before they shut down the cameras. I saw all that shit that ‘never happened,’” and she draws quotation marks in the air with her index fingers.

That was the last time I talked to Ronnie, the last time I visited her out at La Casa Psychiatric, two or three weeks before she hung herself with an electrical cord. I went to the funeral, of course. The Agency sent a couple of black-suited spooks with carefully worded condolences for her family, and I ducked out before the eulogy was finished.

And here, a few kilometers past the intersection of Tectamus Linea and Harmonia Linea, I see the familiar scatter of black dots laid out helter-

skelter on the crosscut plains. “Ice-water volcanism,” Sarah whispers inside my helmet; I know damn well she isn’t there, hasn’t been anywhere near me for years and years, and I’m alone and only dreaming her voice to break the deafening weight of silence. I count the convection cells like rosary beads, like I was ever Catholic, like someone who might have once believed in sin. I’m still too far up to see any evidence of the lander, so I don’t know which hole is The Hole, Insertion Point 2071A, the open sore that Emmanuel Weatherby-Jones alternately referred to as “the plague gate” and “the mouth of Sakpata” in his book on the Houston incident and its implications for theoretical and applied astrobiology. I had to look that up, because he never explained who or what Sakpata was. I found it in an old book on voodoo and Afro-Caribbean religions. Sakpata is a god of disease.

I’m too far up to guess which hole is Sakpata’s mouth, and I don’t try.

I don’t want to know.

A different sort of god is patiently waiting for me on the horizon.

“They started screaming,” Ronnie says. “Man, I’ll never forget that sound, no matter how many pills these assholes feed me. We all sat there, too fucking stunned to move, and this skinny little guy from CNN – ”

“Last time he was from *Newsweek*,” I say, interrupting her, and she shakes her head and takes another drag, coughs and rubs at her bloodshot eyes.

“You think it makes any goddamned difference?”

“No,” I reply dishonestly, and she stares at me for a while without saying anything else.

“When’s the last time you got a decent night’s sleep?” she asks me, finally, and I might laugh, or I might shrug.

“Yeah,” she says. “That’s what I thought.”

She starts rattling on about the hydrobot, then, the towering black smokers, thermal vents, chemosynthesis, those first grainy snatches of video, but I’m not listening. I’m too busy zipping helplessly along above buckled Europan plains and vast stretches of blocky, shattered chaos material; a frozen world caught in the shadow of Big Daddy Jupiter, frozen for ages beyond counting, but a long fucking way from dead, and I would wake up screaming or crying or, if I was lucky, too scared to make any sound at all.

“They’re ready for you now, Mr. Paine,” the cop said, plain old NYPD street blue, and I wondered what the fuck he was doing here, why the Agency was taking chances like that. Probably the same poor bastard who’d found the spooch, I figured. Templeton had told me that someone in the building had complained about the smell and, so, the super buzzed the cops, so this was most likely the guy who answered the call. He might have a partner around somewhere. I nodded at him, and he glanced nervously back over his shoulder at the open door to the apartment, the translucent polyurethane iso-seal curtain with its vertical black zipper running right down the middle, all the air hoses snaking in and out of the place, keeping the pressure inside lower than the pressure outside. I doubted he would still be breathing when the sweeper crews were finished with the scene. The Agency has a low tolerance for loose ends.

“You see this sort of shit very often?” he asked, and it didn’t take a particularly sensitive son of a bitch to hear the fear in his voice, the fear and confusion and whatever comes after panic. I didn’t respond. I was busy checking the batteries in one of my cameras and, besides, I had the usual orders from Templeton to keep my mouth shut around civvies. And knowing the guy was probably already good as dead, that he’d signed his death warrant just by showing up for work that morning, didn’t make me particularly eager to chat.

“Well, I don’t mind telling you, I’ve never seen shit like that thing in there,” he said and coughed. “I mean, you see some absolutely fucked-up shit in this city, and I even did my four years in the army – hell, I was in fucking Damascus after the bomb, but holy Christ Almighty.”

“You were in Damascus?” I asked, but didn’t look up from my equipment, too busy double-checking the settings on the portable genetigraph clipped to my belt to make eye contact.

“Oh yeah, I was there. I got to help clean up the mess when the fires burned out.”

“Then that’s something we have in common,” I told him and flipped my cam’s on switch and the grey OLED screen showed me five zeros. I was patched into the portable lab down on the street, a black Chevy van with Maryland plates and a yellow ping-pong ball stuck on the antenna. I knew Sarah would be in the van, waiting for my feed, jacked in, riding the amps, hearing everything I heard, seeing everything I saw through her perfectly calibrated eyes.

“You were in Syria?” the cop asked me, glad to have something to talk about besides what he’d seen in the apartment.

“No, I clean up other people’s messes.”

“Oh,” he said, sounding disappointed. “I see.”

“Had a good friend in the war, though. But he was stationed in Cyprus, and then the Taurus Mountains.”

“You ever talk with him? You know, about the war?”

“Nope. He didn’t make it back,” I said, finally looking up, and I winked at the cop and stepped quickly past him to the tech waiting for me at the door. I could see she was sweating inside her hazmat hood, even though it was freezing in the hallway. Scrubbers don’t get hazmat suits. It interferes with the contact, so we settle for a couple of hours in decon afterwards, antibiotics, antitox, purgatives, and hope we don’t come up red somewhere down the line.

“This is bad, ain’t it?” the cop asked. “I mean, this is something *real* bad.” I didn’t turn around, just shrugged my shoulders as the tech unzipped the plastic curtain for me.

“Is that how it looked to you?” I replied. I could feel the gentle rush of air into the apartment as the slit opened in front of me.

“Jesus, man, all I want’s a straight fucking answer,” he said. “I think I deserve that much. Don’t you?” and since I honestly couldn’t say one way or the other, since I didn’t even care, I ignored him and stepped through the curtain into this latest excuse for Hell.

There’s still an exhibit at the American Museum of Natural History, on the fourth floor with the old Hall of Vertebrate Origins and all the dinosaur bones. The Agency didn’t shut it down after the first outbreaks, the glory spooches that took out a whole block in Philadelphia and a trailer park somewhere in West Virginia, but the exhibit’s not as popular as you might think. A dark, dusty alcove crowded with scale models and dioramas, monitors running clips from the IcePIC’s hydrobot, endless black and white loops of grey seafloors more than half a billion kilometers from earth. When the exhibit first opened, there were a few specimens on loan from NASA, but those were all removed a long time ago. I never saw them for myself, but an acquaintance on staff at the museum, a geologist, assures me they were there. A blue-black bit of volcanic rock sealed artfully in a Lucite pyramid, and two formalin-filled specimen canisters, one containing a pink

worm-like organism no more than a few centimeters in length, the other preserving one of the ugly little slugs that the mission scientists dubbed “star minnows.”

“Star leeches” would have been more accurate.

On Tuesday afternoon, the day after I’d worked the scene on Columbus, hung over and hoping to avoid another visit from Sarah, I took the B-Line from my hotel to the museum and spent a couple of hours sitting on a bench in that neglected alcove, watching the video clips play over and over again for no one but me. Three monitors running simultaneously – a NASA documentary on the exploration of Europa, beginning with Pioneer 10 in 1973, then a flyover of the moon’s northern hemisphere recorded shortly before the IcePIC orbiter deployed its probes, and, finally, a snippet of film shot beneath the ice. That’s the one I’d come to see. I chewed aspirin and watched as the hydrobot’s unblinking eyes peered through veils of silt and megaplankton, into the interminable darkness of an alien ocean, the determined glare of the bot’s lights never seeming to reach more than a few feet into the gloom. Near the end of the loop, you get to see one of the thermal vents, fringed with towering sulfide chimneys spewing superheated, methane- and hydrogen-rich water into the frigid Europan ocean. In places, the sides of the chimneys were completely obscured by a writhing, swaying carpet of creatures. Something like an eel slipped unexpectedly past the camera lens. A few seconds later, the seafloor was replaced by a brief stream of credits and then the NASA logo before the clip started itself over again.

I tried hard to imagine how amazing these six minutes of video must have seemed, once upon a time, how people must have stood in lines just to see it, back before the shit hit the fan and everyone everywhere stopped wanting to talk about IcePIC and its fucking star minnows. Before the government axed most of NASA’s exobiology program, scrapped all future missions to Europa, and cancelled plans to further explore Titan. Back before ET became a four-letter word. But no matter how hard I tried, all I could think about was that thing on the bed, the crap growing from the walls of the apartment and dripping from the goddamn ceiling.

In the museum, above the monitor, there was a long quote from H. G. Wells printed in red-brown ink on a clear Lexan plaque, and I read it several times, wishing that I had a cigarette – “We look back through countless millions of years and see the great will to live struggling out of the intertidal

slime, struggling from shape to shape and from power to power, crawling and then walking confidently upon the land, struggling generation after generation to master the air, creeping down into the darkness of the deep; we see it turn upon itself in rage and hunger and reshape itself anew, we watch it draw nearer and more akin to us, expanding, elaborating itself, pursuing its relentless inconceivable purpose, until at last it reaches us and its being beats through our brains and arteries."

I've never cared very much for irony. It usually leaves a sick, empty feeling in my gut. I wondered why no one had taken the plaque down.

By the time I got back to my room it was almost dark, even though I'd splurged and taken a taxi. After the exhibit, the thought of being trapped in the crowded, stinking subway, hurtling along through the city's bowels, through those tunnels where the sun never reaches, gave me a righteous fucking case of the heebie-jeebies and, what the hell, the Agency was picking up the tab. All those aspirin had left my stomach aching and sour, and hadn't done much of anything about the hangover, but there was an unopened pint waiting for me beneath the edge of the bed.

I was almost asleep when Sarah called.

Here's a better quote. I've been carrying it around with me for the last few years, in my head and on a scrap of paper. It showed up in my email one day, sent by some anonymous someone or another from an account that turned out to be bogus. Scrubbers get a lot of anonymous email. Tips, rumors, bullshit, hearsay, wicked little traps set by the Agency, confessions, nightmares, curses, you name it and it comes rolling our way, and after a while you don't even bother to wonder who sent the shit. But this one, this one kept me awake a few nights:

But what would a deep-sea fish learn even if a steel plate of a wrecked vessel above him should drop and bump him on the nose?

Our submergence in a sea of conventionality of almost impenetrable density.

Sometimes I'm a savage who has found something on the beach of his island. Sometimes I'm a deep-sea fish with a sore nose.

The greatest of mysteries:

Why don't they ever come here, or send here, openly?

Of course, there's nothing to that mystery if we don't take so seriously the notion – that we must be interesting. It's probably for moral reasons that

they stay away – but even so, there must be some degraded ones among them.

It's that last bit that always sinks its teeth (or claws or whatever the fuck have you) into me and hangs on. Charles Hoyt Fort. *The Book of the Damned.* First published in 1919, a century and a half before IcePIC, and it occurs to me now that I shouldn't be any less disturbed by prescience than I am by irony. But there you go. Sometimes I'm a savage. Sometimes I'm a deep-sea fish. And my life is become the sum of countless degradations.

"You're not going down there alone," Sarah said, telling, not asking, because, like I already noted, Sarah stopped being the kind of girl who asks questions when she signed on with the Agency for life, plus whatever else they could milk her biomeched cadaver for. I didn't reply immediately, lay there a minute or three, rubbing my eyes, waiting for the headache to start in on me again, listening to the faint, insistent crackle from the phone. Manhattan's landlines were shit and roses that February, had been that way for years, ever since some Puerto Ricans in Brooklyn had popped a homemade micro-EMP rig to celebrate the Fourth of July. I wondered why Sarah hadn't called me on my thumbline while I looked about for the scotch. Turned out, I was lying on the empty bottle, and I rolled over, wishing I'd never been born. I held the phone cradled between my left shoulder and my cheek and stared at the darkness outside the window of my hotel room.

"Do you even know what time it is?" I asked her.

"Templeton said you were talking about going out to Roosevelt. He said you might have gone already."

"I didn't say dick to Templeton about Roosevelt," I said, which was the truth – I hadn't – but also entirely beside the point. It was John Templeton's prerogative to stay a few steps ahead of his employees, especially when those employees were scrubbers, especially freebie scrubbers on the juice. I tossed the empty bottle at a cockroach on the wall across the room. The bottle didn't break, but squashed the roach and left a satisfying dent in the drywall.

"You know Agency protocol for dealing with terrorists."

I rubbed at my face.

"They went and stuck something in your head so you don't *have* to sleep anymore, is that it?"

“You can’t go to the island alone,” she said. “I’m sending a couple of plain-clothes men over. They’ll be at your hotel by six A.M., at the latest.”

“Yeah, and I’ll be fucking asleep at six,” I mumbled, more interested in watching the roaches that had emerged to feed on the remains of the one I’d nailed than arguing with her.

“We can’t risk losing you, Mr. Paine. It’s too late to call in someone else if anything happens. You know that as well as I do.”

“Do I?”

“You’re a drunk, not an idiot.”

“Look, Sarah, if I start scutzing around out there with two of Temp’s goons in tow, I’ll be lucky if I *find* a fucking stitch, much less get it to talk to me.”

“They’re all animals,” Sarah said, meaning the stitches and meatdolls and genetic changelings that had claimed Roosevelt Island a decade or so back. There was more than a hint of loathing in her voice. “It makes me sick, just thinking about them.”

“Did you ever stop to consider they probably feel the same way about you?”

“No,” Sarah said coldly, firmly, one-hundred percent shit-sure of herself. “I never have.”

“If those fuckers knock on my door at six o’clock, I swear to god, Sarah, I’ll shoot them.”

“I’ll tell them to wait for you in the lobby.”

“That’s real damn considerate of you.”

There was another static-littered moment of silence then, and I closed my eyes tight. The headache was back and had brought along a few friends for the party. My thoughts were starting to bleed together, and I wondered if I’d vomit before or after Sarah finally let me off the phone. I wondered if cyborgs vomited. I wondered exactly what all those agents in the black Chevy van had seen on their consoles and face screens when I’d walked over and touched a corner of the bed in the apartment on Columbus Avenue.

“I’m going to hang up now, Sarah. I’m going back to sleep.”

“You’re sober.”

“As a judge,” I whispered and glanced back at the window, trying to think about anything at all except throwing up. There were bright lights moving across the sky above the river, red and green and white, turning

clockwise; one of the big military copters, an old Phoenix 6-98 or one of the newer Japanese whirlybirds, making its circuit around the Rotten Apple.

"You're still a lousy liar," she said.

"I'll have to try harder."

"Don't fuck this up, Mr. Paine. You're a valued asset. The Agency would like to see you remain that way."

"I'm going back to sleep," I said again, disregarding the not-so-subtle threat tucked between her words; it wasn't anything I didn't already know. "And I meant what I said about shooting those assholes. Don't think I didn't. Anyone knocks on this door before eight sharp, and that's all she wrote."

"They'll be waiting in the lobby when you're ready."

"Goodnight, Sarah."

"Goodnight, Mr. Paine," she replied, and a second or two later there was only the ragged dial tone howling in my ear. The lights outside the window were gone, the copter probably all the way to Harlem by now. I almost made it to the toilet before I was sick.

If I didn't keep getting the feeling that there's someone standing behind me, someone looking over my shoulder as I write this, I'd say more about the dreams. The dreams are always there, tugging at me, insistent, selfish, wanting to be spilled out into the wide, wide world where everyone and his brother can get a good long gander at them. They're not content anymore with the space *inside* my skull. My skull is a prison for dreams, an enclosed and infinite prison space where the arrows on the number line point towards each other, infinitely converging but never, ever, ever meeting, and so infinite all the same. But I *do* keep getting that feeling, and there's still the matter of the thing in the apartment.

The thing on the bed.

The thing that the cop who'd been in Damascus after the Israelis' 40-megaton fireworks show died for.

My thirteenth and final contact. Lucky thirteen.

After I was finished with the makeshift airlock at the door, one of Templeton's field medics, safe and snug inside a blue hazmat suit, led me through the brightly-lit apartment. I held one hand cupped over my nose and mouth, but the thick clouds of neon yellow disinfectant seeped easily between my fingers, gagging me. My eyes burned and watered, making it

even more difficult to see. I've always thought that shit smelled like licorice, fennel, anise – star anise – but it seems to smell like different things to different people. Sarah used to say the gas reminded her of burning tires. I used to know a guy who said it smelled like carnations.

"It's in the bedroom," the medic said, his voice flat and tinny through the suit's audio. "It doesn't seem to have spread to any of the other rooms. How was the jump from Los Angeles, sir?"

I didn't answer him, too ripped on adrenaline for small talk and pleasantries, and he didn't really seem to care, my silence just another part of the routine. I took shallow breaths and followed the medic through the yellow fog, which was growing much thicker as we approached ground zero. The disinfectant was originally manufactured by Dow for domestic bioterrorism clean-up, but the Agency's clever boys and girls had added a pinch of this, a dash of that, and it always seemed to do the job. We passed a kitchenette, beer cans and dirty dishes and an open box of corn flakes sitting on the counter, then turned left into a short hallway leading past a bathroom too small for a rat to take a piss in, past a framed photograph of a lighthouse on a rocky shore (the bits we remember, the bits we forget), to the bedroom. Templeton was there, of course, decked out in his orange hazmat threads, one hand resting confidently on the butt of the big Beretta Pulse 38A on his hip, and he pointed at me and then pointed at the bed.

Sometimes I'm a deep-sea fish.

Sometimes I'm a savage.

"We're still running MRS and backtrace on these two," Templeton said, pointing at the bed again, "but I'm pretty sure the crit's a local." His grey eyes peered warily out at me, the lights inside his hood shining bright so I had no trouble at all seeing his face through the haze.

"I figure one of them picked it up from an untagged mobile, probably the woman there, and it's been hitching dormant for the last few weeks. We're guessing the trigger was viral. She might have caught a cold. Corona's always a good catalyst."

I took a deep breath and coughed. Then I gagged again and stared up at the ceiling for a moment.

"Come on, Deet. I need you frosty on this one. You're not drunk, are you? Fennimore said – "

"I'm not drunk," I replied, and I wasn't, not yet. I hadn't had a drink in almost six months, but, hey, the *good* news was, the drought was almost

over.

“That’s great,” Templeton said. “That’s real damn great. That’s exactly what I wanted to hear.”

I looked back at the bed.

“So, when you gonna tell me what’s so goddamn special about this one?” I asked. “The way Sarah sounded, I figured you’d already lost a whole building.”

“What’s so goddamn special about them, Deet, is that they’re still conscious, both of them. Initial EEGs are coming up pretty solid. Clean alpha, beta, and delta. The theta’s are weakening, but the brain guys say the waves are still synchronous enough to call coherent.”

Temp kept talking, but I tuned him out and forced myself to take a long, hard look at the bed.

Sometimes I’m a deep-sea fish.

The woman’s left eye was still intact, open very wide and wet with tears, her blue iris bright as Christmas Day, and I realized she was watching me.

“It’s pure,” Templeton said, leaning closer to the bed, “more than ninety-percent proximal to the Lælaps strain. Beats the fuck outta me why their brains aren’t soup by now.”

“I’m going to need a needle,” I muttered, speaking automatically, some part of me still there to walk the walk and talk the talk, some part of me getting ready to take the plunge, because the only way out of this hole was straight ahead. A very small, insensate part of me not lost in that pleading blue eye. “Twelve and a half max, okay, and not that fife-and-drum Australian shit you gave me in Boston. I don’t want to feel *anything* in there but the critter, you understand?”

“Sure,” Templeton said, smiling like a ferret.

“I mean it. Whatever’s going through their heads right now, I don’t want to hear it, Temp. Not so much as a peep. Not even a fucking whisper.”

“Hey, you’re calling the shots, Deet.”

“Bullshit,” I said. “Don’t suck my dick, just get me the needle.”

He motioned to a medic, and in a few more minutes the drugs were singing me towards that spiraling ebony pipeline, the Scrubber’s Road, Persephone’s Staircase, the Big Drop, the White Bull, whatever you want to call it, it’s all the same to me. I was beginning to sweat and trying to make it through the procedure checklist one last time. Templeton patted me on the

back, the way he always did when I was standing there on the brink. I said a silent prayer to anything that might be listening that one day it'd be his carcass rotting away at the center of the Agency's invisible clockwork circus. And then I kneeled down at the edge of the bed and got to work.

Sarah sent the goons over, just like she'd said she would, but I ducked out the back and, luckily, she hadn't seen fit to have any of Temp's people watching all the hotel's exits. Maybe she couldn't pull that many warm bodies off the main gig down on Columbus. Maybe Temp had bigger things on his mind. I caught a cash-and-ride taxi that took me all the way to the ruins along York Avenue. The Vietnamese driver hadn't wanted to get any closer to the Queensboro Bridge than Third, but I slipped him five hundred, and he found a little more courage somewhere. He dropped me at the corner of Second and East Sixty-First Street, crossed himself twice, and drove away, bouncing recklessly over the trash and disintegrating blacktop. I watched him go, feeling more alone than I'd expected. Overhead, the Manhattan sky was the color of buttermilk and mud, and I wished briefly, pointlessly, that I'd brought a gun. The 9mm Samson-L4 Enforcer I'd bought in a Hollywood pawnshop almost four years before was back at the hotel, hidden in a locked compartment of my suitcase. But I knew it'd be a whole lot worse to be picked up crossing the barricades without a pass if I were also carrying an unregistered weapon, one more big red blinking excuse for the MPs to play a few rounds of Punch and Judy with my face while they waited for my papers and my story about the Agency to check out.

I started walking north, the grey-blue snow crunching loudly beneath my boots, the collar of my coat turned up against the wind whistling raw between the empty, burned-out buildings. I'd heard security was running slack around the Sixty-Third Street entrance. I might get lucky. It had happened before.

"Yes, but what exactly did you think you'd find on the island?" Buddhadev Krishnamurthy asked when he interviewed me for his second book on technoshamanism and the Roosevelt parahumanists, the one that won him a Pulitzer.

"Missing pieces, maybe," I replied. "I was just following my nose. The Miyake girl turned up during the contact."

“But going to the island alone, wasn’t that rather above and beyond? I mean, if you hated Templeton and the Agency so much, why stick your neck out like that?”

“Old habits,” I said, sipping at my tequila and trying hard to remember how long it had taken me to find a way past the guards and up onto the bridge. “Old habits and bad dreams,” I added, and then, “But I never said I was doing it for the Agency.” I knew I was telling him more than I’d intended. Not that it mattered. None of my interview made it past the censors and into print.

I kept to the center lanes, except for a couple of times when rusted and fire-blackened tangles of wrecked automobiles and police riot-rollers forced me to the edges of the bridge. The West Channel glimmered dark and iridescent beneath the late February clouds, a million shifting colors dancing lazily across the oily surface of the river. The wind shrieked through the cantilever spans, like angry sirens announcing my trespass to anyone who would listen. I kept waiting for the sound of helicopter rotors or a foot patrol on its way back from Queens, for some sharpshooter’s bullet to drop me dead in my tracks. Maybe it was wishful thinking.

Halfway across I found the access stairs leading down to the island, right where my contact in Street and Sanitation had said they would be. I checked my watch. It was five minutes until noon.

“Will you tell me about the dreams, Mr. Paine?” Krishnamurthy asked, after he’d ordered me another beer and another shot of tequila. His voice was like silk and cream, the sort of voice that seduced, that tricked you into lowering your defenses just long enough for him to get a good peek at all the nasty nooks and crannies. “I hear lots of scrubbers had trouble with nightmares back then, before the new neural-drag sieves were available. The suicide rate’s dropped almost 50 percent since they became standard issue. Did you know that, Mr. Paine?”

“No,” I told him. “Guess I missed the memo. I’m kind of outside the flow these days.”

“You’re a lucky man,” he said. “You should count your blessings. At least you made it out in one piece. At least you made it out sane.”

I think I told him to fuck off then. I know I didn’t tell him about the dreams.

“What do you see down there, Deet? The sensors are getting a little hinky on me,” Sarah said and, in the dreams, back when, in the day, before the tweaker’s silver chip, I took another clumsy step towards the edge of the chasm created by hot water welling up from the deep-sea vents along the Great Charon Ridge. A white plume of salty steam rose high into the thin Europan atmosphere, blotting out the western horizon, boiling off into the indifferent blackness of space. I knew I didn’t want to look over the edge again. I’d been there enough times already, and it was always the same. I reminded myself that no one had ever walked on Europa, no one human, and it was only a dream. Shit. Listen to me. *Only* a dream.

“Am I coming through?” Sarah asked. “Can you hear me?”

I didn’t answer her. My mouth was too dry to speak, bone dry from fear and doubt and the desiccated air circulating through the helmet of my EMU suit.

“I need you to acknowledge, Deet. Can you hear me?”

The mouth of Sakpata, the plague gate, yawning toothless and insatiable before me, almost nine kilometers from one side to the other, more than five miles from the edge of the hole down to the water. I was standing near the center of the vast field of cryovolcanic lenticulae first photographed by the Galileo probe in 1998, on its fifteenth trip around Jupiter. Convection currents had pushed the crust into gigantic pressure domes that finally cracked and collapsed under their own weight, exposing the ocean below. I took another step, almost slipping on the ice, and wondered how far I was from the spot where IcePIC had made landfall.

“Deet, do you copy?”

“Do you believe in sin, Deet?”

Nor shapes of men nor beasts we ken –

The ice was all between.

Sarah sets her coffee cup down and watches me from the other side of our apartment on Cahuenga. Her eyes are still her eyes, full of impatience and secrets. She reaches for a cigarette, and I wish this part weren’t a dream, that I could go back to *here* and start again. This sunny LA morning, Sarah wearing nothing but her bra and panties, and me still curled up in the warm spot she left in the sheets. Go back and change the words. Change every goddamn day that’s come between now and then.

“They want my decision by tomorrow morning,” she says and lights her cigarette. The smoke hangs like a caul about her face.

“Tell them you need more time,” I reply. “Tell them you have to think about it.”

“It’s the fucking Agency,” she says and shakes her head. “You don’t ask them for more time. You don’t ask them shit.”

“I don’t know what you want me to say, Sarah.”

“It’s everything I’ve always wanted,” she says and flicks ash into an empty soft drink can.

Are those her ribs through which the Sun

Did peer, as through a grate?

I took another step nearer the chasm and wished that this would end and I would wake up. If I could wake up, I wouldn’t have to see. If I could wake up, there’d be a bottle of scotch or bourbon or tequila waiting for me, a drink of something to take the edge off the dryness in my mouth. The sun was rising behind me, a distant, pale thing lost among the stars, and the commlink buzzed and crackled in my ears.

“If it’s what you want, take it,” I say, the same thing I always say, the same words I can never take back. “I’m not going to stand in your way.” I could tell it was the last thing that Sarah wanted to hear. The End. The curtain falls, and everyone takes a bow. The next day, Wednesday, I’ll drive her to LAX-1, and she’ll take the 4:15 jump to D.C.

We are more alone than ever.

Ronnie used her own blood to write those six words on the wall of her room at La Casa, the night she killed herself.

My boots left no trace whatsoever on the slick blue-white ice. A few more steps and I was finally standing at the edge, walking cautiously onto the wide shelf formed by an angular chaos block jutting a few meters out over the pit. The constant steam had long since worn the edges of the block smooth. Eventually, this block would melt free, undercut by ages of heat and water vapor, and pitch into the churning abyss far below. I took a deep breath of the dry, stale air inside my helmet and peered into the throat of Sakpata.

“Tell me, what the hell did we expect to find out there, Deet?” Ronnie asked me. “What did we think it would be? Little grey men with answers to all the mysteries of the universe, free for the asking? A few benign extremophiles clinging stubbornly to the bottom of an otherwise lifeless sea? I can’t *remember* anymore. I try, but I can’t. I lie awake at night trying to remember.”

“I don’t think it much matters,” I told her, and she started crying again.

“It was waiting for us, Deet,” she sobbed. “It was waiting for us all along, a hundred million fucking years alone out there in the dark. It knew we’d come, sooner or later.”

Sarah was standing on the ice behind me, naked, the wind tearing at her plastic skin.

“Why do you keep coming here?” she asked. “What do you think you’ll find?”

“Why do you keep following me?”

“You turned off your comms. I wasn’t getting a signal. You didn’t leave me much choice.”

I turned to face her, turning my back on the hole, but the wind had already pulled her apart and scattered the pieces across the plain.

We are more alone than ever.

And then I’m in the pipe, slipping along the Scrubber’s Road, no friction, no resistance, rushing by high above the frozen moon, waiting for that blinding, twinkling moment of perfect agony when my mind brushes up against that other mind. That instant when it tries to hide, tries to withdraw, and I dig in and hang on and drag it screaming into the light. I hear the whir of unseen machineries as the techs on the outside try to keep up with me, with it.

I stand alone on the lips of Sakpata’s mouth, where no man has ever stood, at the foot of the bed on Columbus, in the airport lobby saying goodbye to Sarah. I have all my cameras, my instruments, because I’ll need all that later on, when the spin is over, and I’m drunk, and there’s nothing left but the footwork.

When I have nothing left to do but track down the carrier and put a bullet or two in his or her or its head.

Cut the cord. Tie off the loose ends.

“Do you believe in sin, Deet?”

Instead of the cross, the Albatross…

“It’s only a question. Stop trying to make it anything more than that.”

“Do you copy?” Sarah asks again. “Global can’t get a fix on you.” I take another step closer to the hole, and it slips a few feet farther away from me. The sky is steam and stars and infinite night.

I followed East Road north to Main Street, walking as quickly as the snow and black ice and wrecks littering the way would allow. I passed through decaying canyons of brick and steel, broken windows and grey concrete, the tattered ruins of the mess left after the Feds gave Roosevelt Island up for lost, built their high barricades and washed their righteous hands of the place. I kept my eyes on the road at my feet, but I could feel *them* watching me, following me, asking each other if this one was trouble or just some fool out looking for his funeral. I might have been either. I still wasn't sure myself. There were tracks in the snow and frozen mud, here and there, some of them more human than others.

Near the wild place that had once been Blackwell Park, I heard something call out across the island. It was a lonely, frightened sound, and I walked a little faster.

I wondered if Sarah would try to send an extraction team in after me, if she was in deep sharn with Templeton and the boys for letting me scoot. I wondered if maybe Temp was already counting me among the dead and kicking himself for not putting me under surveillance, trying to figure out how the hell he was going to lay it all out for the bastards in Washington. It took me the better part of an hour to reach the northern tip of the island and the charred and crumbling corpse of Coler-Goldwater Hospital. The ragtag militia of genetic anarchists who had converged on Manhattan in the autumn of '69, taking orders from a schizo ex-movie star who called herself Circe Nineteen, had claimed the old hospital as their headquarters. When the army decided to start shelling, Coler had taken the worst of the mortars. Circe Nineteen had been killed by a sniper, but there'd been plenty of freaks on hand to fill her shoes, so to speak.

Beneath the sleeting February sky, the hospital looked as dead as the day after Armageddon. I tried not to think about the spooch, all the things I'd seen and heard the day before, the things I'd felt, the desperate stream of threats and promises and prayers the crit had spewed at me when I'd finally come to the end of the shimmering aether pipeline and we'd started the dance.

Inside, the hospital stunk like a zoo, a dying, forgotten zoo, but at least I was out of the wind. My face and hands had gone numb. How would the Agency feel about a scrubber without his fingers? Would they toss me on the scrap heap, or would they just give me a shiny new set, made in Osaka, better than the originals? Maybe work a little of the biomech magic they'd

worked on Sarah? I followed a long ground-floor hallway past doors and doorways without doors, pitch dark rooms and chiaroscuro rooms ruled by the disorienting interplay of shadow and light, until I came to a row of elevators. All the doors had been jammed more or less open at some point, exposing shafts filled with dust and gears and rusted cables. I stood there a while, as my fingers and lips began to tingle, the slow pins-and-needles thaw, and listened to the building whispering around me.

"They're all animals," Sarah had sneered the day before. But they weren't, of course, no more than she was truly a machine. I knew Sarah was bright enough to see the truth, even before they'd squeezed all that hardware into her skull. Even if she could never admit it to herself or anyone else. The cyborgs and H+ brigade were merely opposing poles in the same rebellion against the flesh – black pawn, white pawn – north and south on the same twisted contraevolutionary road. Not that it made much difference to me. It sill doesn't. But standing there, my breath fogging and the feeling slowly returning to my hands, her arrogance was pissing me off more than usual. Near as I could tell, the biggest difference between Sarah and whatever was waiting for me in the bombed-out hospital that afternoon – maybe the only difference that actually mattered – was that the men and women in power had found a use for her kind, while the stitches and changelings had never been anything to them but a nuisance. It might have gone a different way. It might yet.

There was a stairwell near the elevators, and I climbed it to the third floor. I hadn't thought to bring a flashlight with me, so I stayed close to the wall, feeling my way through the gloom, stumbling more than once when my feet encountered chunks of rubble that had fallen from somewhere overhead.

On the third floor, the child was waiting for me.

"What do you want here?" he barked and blinked at me with the golden eyes of a predatory bird. He was naked, his skin hidden beneath a coat of fine yellow-brown fur.

"Who are you?" I asked him.

"The manticore said you were coming. She saw you on the bridge. What do you want?"

"I'm looking for a girl named Jet."

The child laughed, a strange, hitching laugh and rolled his eyes. He leaned forward, staring at me intently, expectantly, and the vertical pupils of

those big golden eyes dilated slightly.

“Ain’t no *girls* here, Mister,” he chuckled. “Not anymore. You shizzed or what?”

“Is there anyone here named Jet? I’ve come a long way to talk to her.”

“You got a gun, maybe?” he asked. “You got a knife?”

“No,” I said. “I don’t. I just want to talk.”

“You come out to Stitchtown without a gun *or* a knife? Then you must have some bangers, Mister. You must have whennymegs big as my fist,” and he held up one clenched fist so I could see exactly what he meant. “Or you don’t want to live so much longer, maybe.”

“Maybe,” I replied.

“Meat’s scarce this time of year,” the boy chuckled and then licked his thin ebony lips.

Down at the other end of the hallway, something growled softly, and the boy glanced over his shoulder, then back up at me. He was smiling, a hard smile that was neither cruel nor kind, revealing the sharp tips of his long canines and incisors. He looked disappointed.

“All in good time,” he said and took my hand. “All in good time,” and I let him lead me towards the eager shadows crouched at the other end of the hallway.

Near the end of his book, Emmanuel Weatherby-Jones writes, “The calamities following, and following from, the return of the IcePIC probe may stand as mankind’s gravest defeat. For long millennia, we had asked ourselves if we were alone in the cosmos. Indeed, that question has surely formed much of the fundamental matter of the world’s religions. But when finally answered, once and for all, we were forced to accept that there had been greater comfort in our former, vanished ignorance.”

We are more alone than ever. Ronnie got that part right.

When I’d backed out of the contact and the techs had a solid lockdown on the critter’s signal, when the containment waves were pinging crystal mad off the putrescent walls of the bedroom on Columbus and one of the medics had administered a stimulant to clear my head and bring me the rest of the way home, I sat down on the floor and cried.

Nothing unusual about that. I’ve cried almost every single time. At least I didn’t puke.

“Good job,” Templeton said and rested a heavy gloved hand on my shoulder.

“Fuck you. I could hear them. I could hear both of them, you asshole.”

“We did what we could, Deet. I couldn’t have you so tanked on morphine you’d end up flat lining.”

“Oh my god. Oh Jesus god,” I sobbed like an old woman, gasping, my heart racing itself round smaller and smaller circles, fried to a crisp on the big syringe full of synthetadrine the medic had pumped into my left arm. “Kill it, Temp. You kill it right this fucking instant.”

“We have to stick to protocol,” he said calmly, staring down at the writhing mass of bone and meat and protoplasm on the bed. A blood-red tendril slithered from the place where the man’s mouth had been and began burrowing urgently into the sagging mattress. “Just as soon as we have you debriefed and we’re sure stasis is holding, then we’ll terminate life signs.”

“Fuck it,” I said and reached for his Beretta, tearing the pistol from the velcro straps of the holster with enough force that Temp almost fell over on top of me. I shoved him aside and aimed at the thing on the bed.

“Deet, don’t you even fucking *think* about pulling that trigger!”

“You can go straight to Hell,” I whispered, to Templeton, to the whole goddamn Agency, to the spooch and that single hurting blue eye still watching me. I squeezed the trigger, emptying the whole clip into what little was left of the man and woman’s swollen skulls, hoping it would be enough.

Then someone grabbed for the gun, and I let them take it from me.

“You stupid motherfucker,” Temp growled. “You goddamn, stupid bastard. As soon as this job is finished, you are *out*. Do you fucking understand me, Deet? You are *yesterday’s fucking news!*”

“Yeah,” I replied and sat back down on the floor. In the silence left after the roar of the gun, the containment waves pinged, and my ears rang, and the yellow fog settled over me like a shroud.

At least, that’s the way I like to pretend it all went down. Late at night, when I can’t sleep, when the pills and booze aren’t enough, I like to imagine there was one moment in my wasted, chickenshit life when I did what I should have done.

Whatever really happened, I’m sure someone’s already written it down somewhere. I don’t have to do it again.

In the cluttered little room at the end of the third-floor hallway, the woman with a cat's face and nervous, twitching ears sat near a hole that had been a window before the mortars. There was no light but the dim winter sun. The boy sat at her feet and never took his eyes off me. The woman – if she had a name, I never learned it – only looked at me once, when I first entered the room. The fire in her eyes made short work of whatever resolve I had left, and I was glad when she turned back to the hole in the wall and stared north across the river towards the Astoria refineries.

She told me the girl had left a week earlier. She didn't have any idea where Jet Miyake might have gone.

"She brings food and medicine, sometimes," the woman said, confirming what I'd already suspected. Back then, there were a lot of people willing to risk prison or death to get supplies to Roosevelt Island. Maybe there still are. I couldn't say.

"I'm sorry to hear about her parents," she said.

"It was quick," I lied. "They didn't suffer."

"You smell like death, Mr. Paine," the woman said, flaring her nostrils slightly. The boy at her feet laughed and hugged himself, rocking from side to side. "I think it follows you. I believe you herald death."

"Yeah, I think the same thing myself sometimes," I replied.

"You hunt the aliens?" she purred.

"That's one way of looking at it."

"There's a certain irony, don't you think? Our world was dying. We poisoned *our* world, and then went looking for life somewhere else. Do you think we found what we were looking for, Mr. Paine?"

"No," I told her. "I don't think we ever will."

"Go back to the city, Mr. Paine. Go now. You won't be safe after sunset. Some of us are starving. Some of our children are starving."

I thanked her and left the room. The boy followed me as far as the stairs, then he stopped and sat chuckling to himself, his laughter echoing through the stairwell, as I moved slowly, step by blind step, through the uncertain darkness. I retraced my path to the street, following Main to East, past the wild places, through the canyons, and didn't look back until I was standing on the bridge again.

I found Jet Miyake in Chinatown two days later, hiding out in the basement of the Buddhist Society of Wonderful Enlightenment on Madison

Street. The Agency had files on a priest there, demonstrating a history of pro-stitch sentiment. Jet Miyake ran, because they always run if they can, and I chased her, down Mechanics Alley, across Henry, and finally caught up with her in a fish market on East Broadway, beneath the old Manhattan Bridge. She tried to lose me in the maze of kiosks, the glistening mounds of factory-vat octopus and squid, eel and tuna and cod laid out on mountains of crushed ice. She headed for a back door and almost made it, but slipped on the wet concrete floor and went sprawling ass over tits into a big display of dried soba and canned chicken broth. I don't actually remember all those details, just the girl and the stink of fish, the clatter of the cans on the cement, the angry, frightened shouts from the merchants and customers. But the details, the octopus and soba noodles, I don't know. I think I'm trying to forget this isn't fiction, believe that it happened, that I'm not making it up as I go along.

Sometimes.

Sometimes I'm a savage.

I held the muzzle of my pistol to her right temple while I ran the scan. She gritted her teeth and stared silently up at me. The machine read her dirty as the grey New York snow, though I didn't need the blinking red light on the genetigraph to tell me that. She was hurting, the way only long-term carriers can hurt. I could see it in her eyes, in the sweat streaming down her face, in the faintly bluish tinge of her lips. She'd probably been contaminated for months. I knew it'd be a miracle if she'd infected no one but her parents. I showed her the display screen on the genetigraph and told her what it meant, and I told her what I had to do next.

"You can't stop it, you know," she said, smiling a bitter, sickly smile. "No matter how many people you kill, it's too late. It's been too late from the start."

"I'm sorry," I said, whether I actually was or not, and squeezed the trigger. The 9mm boomed like thunder in a bottle, and suddenly she wasn't my problem anymore. Suddenly, she was just another carcass for the sweepers.

I have become an unreliable narrator. Maybe I've been an unreliable narrator all along. Just like I've been a coward and a hypocrite all along. The things we would rather remember, the things we choose to forget. As the old saying goes, it's only a movie.

I didn’t kill Jet Miyake.

“You can’t stop it, you know,” she said. That part’s the truth. “No matter how many people you kill, it’s too late. It’s been too late from the start.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“We brought it here. We invited it in, and it likes what it sees. It means to stay.” She did smile, but it was a satisfied, secret smile. I stepped back and lowered the muzzle of the gun. The bore had left a slight circular impression on her skin.

“Please step aside, Mr. Paine,” Sarah said, and when I turned around she was standing just a few feet behind me, pointing a ridiculously small carbon-black Glock at the girl. Sarah fired twice and waited until the body stopped convulsing, then put a third bullet in Jet Miyake’s head, just to be sure. Sarah had always been thorough.

“Templeton thought you might get cold feet,” she said and stepped past me, kneeling to inspect the body. “You know this means that you’ll probably be suspended.”

“She was right, wasn’t she?” I muttered. “Sooner or later, we’re going to lose this thing,” and for a moment I considered putting a few rounds into Sarah’s skull, pulling the trigger and spraying brains and blood and silicon across the floor of the fish market. It might have been a mercy killing. But I suppose I didn’t love her quite as much as I’d always thought. Besides, the Agency would have probably just picked up the pieces and stuck her back together again.

“One day at a time, Mr. Paine,” she said. “That’s the only way to stay sane. One day at a time.”

“No past, no future,” I replied.

“If that’s the way you want to look at it.”

She stood up and held out a hand. I popped the clip from my pistol and gave her the gun and the ammo. I removed the genetigraph from my belt, and she took that, too.

“We’ll send someone to the hotel for the rest of your equipment. Please have everything in order. You have your ticket back to Los Angeles.”

“Yes,” I said. “I have my ticket back to Los Angeles.”

“You lasted a lot longer than I thought you would,” she said.

And I left her there, standing over the girl’s body, calling in the kill, ordering the sweeper crew. The next day I flew back to LA and found a bar

where I was reasonably sure no one would recognize me. I started with tequila, moved on to scotch, and woke up two days later, facedown in the sand at Malibu, sick as a dog. The sun was setting, brewing a firestorm on the horizon, and I watched the stars come out above the sea. A meteor streaked across the sky and was gone. It only took me a moment to find Jupiter, Lord of the Heavens, Gatherer of Clouds, hardly more than a bright pinprick near the moon.

Riding the White Bull

For many years I'd wanted to write science fiction, and finally Bill Schafer sort of gave me a shove out the door. I'll admit, I'm very proud of this one, this sprawling, yet claustrophobic, cyber *noir*. Also, one of my earliest experiment's with a first-person narrative, a mode I'd long resisted.

Waycross

…abasht the Devil stood,
And felt how awful goodness is…
John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

"Rise and shine, Snow White," the Gynander growls, and so the albino girl slowly opens her pink eyes, the dream of her dead mother and sunlight and the sheltering sky dissolving to the bare earth and meat-rot stink of the cellar.

Go back to sleep, and I'll be home again, she thinks. *Close my eyes, and none of this has ever happened.* Not the truth, nothing like the truth, but cold comfort better than no comfort at all in this hole behind the place where the monster sleeps during the day. Dancy blinks at the darkness, licks her dry, chapped lips, and tries hard to remember the story her mother was telling her in the dream. Lion's den, whale belly, fiery-furnace Bible story, but all the words and names running together in her head, the pain and numbness in her wrists and ankles more real, and the dream growing smaller and farther away with every beat of her heart.

The raw red thing crouched somewhere at the other side of the cellar makes a soft, wet sound and strikes a match to light the hurricane lamp gripped in the long fingers of its left hand. Dancy closes her eyes, because the angel has warned her never to look at its face until after it puts on one of the skins hanging from the rusted steel hooks set into the ceiling of the cellar. All those blind and shriveled hides like deflated people, deflated animals, and it has promised Dancy that some day very soon she'll hang there, too, one more hollow face, one more mask for it to wear.

"What day…what day is it?" Dancy whispers, hard to talk because her throat's so dry, hard to even swallow, and her tongue feels swollen. "How long have I been down here?"

"Why?" the Gynander asks her. "What difference does it make?"

"No difference," Dancy croaks. "I just wanted to know."

"You got some place to be? You got someone else to kill?"

"I just wanted to know what day of the week it is."

"It isn't any day. It's *night.*"

Yellow-orange lantern light getting in through Dancy's eyelids, warm light and cold shadows, and she squeezes them shut tighter, turns her head to one side so her face is pressed against the hard dirt floor. Not taking any chances because she promised she wouldn't ever look, and if she starts lying to the angel he might stop coming to her.

"Sooner or later, you're gonna *have* to take a look at me, Dancy Flammarion," the Gynander says and laughs its boneshard, thistle laugh. "You're gonna have to open them rabbity little eyes of yours and have a good long look, before we're done."

"I was dreaming. You woke me up. Go away so I can go back to sleep. Kill me, or go away."

"You're already dead, child. Ain't you figured that out yet? You been dead since the day you came looking for me."

Footsteps, then, the heavy, stumbling sounds its splayed feet make against the hard-packed floor, and the clank and clatter of the hooks as it riffles through the hides, deciding what to wear.

"Kill me, or go away," Dancy says again, gets dirt in her mouth and spits it back out.

"Dead as a doornail," it purrs. "Dead as a dodo. Dead as I want you to be."

Dancy tries not to hear what comes next, the dry, stretching noises it makes stuffing itself into the skin suit it's chosen from one of the hooks. If her hands were free she could cover her ears; if they weren't tied together behind her back with nylon rope she could shove her fingers deep into her ears and maybe block the noises out.

"You can open your eyes now," the Gynander says. "I'm decent."

"Kill me," Dancy says, not opening her eyes.

"Why do you keep saying that? You don't want to die. When people want to die, when they *really* want to die, they get a certain smell about them, a certain brittle *incense.* You, you smell like someone who wants to live."

"I failed, and now I want this all to end."

"See, now *that's* the truth," the Gynander says, and there's a ragged zipping-up sort of sound as it seals the skin closed around itself. "You done let that angel of yours down, and you're ashamed, and you're scared. And you sure as hell don't want what you got coming to you. But you *still* don't want to die."

Dancy turns her head and opens her eyes, and now the thing is squatting there in front of her, holding the kerosene lamp close to its face. Borrowed skin stitched together from dead men and dogs, strips of diamond-backed rattlesnake hide, and it pokes at her right shoulder with one long black claw.

“This angel, he got hisself a name?”

“I don’t know,” Dancy says, though she knows well enough that all angels have names. “He’s never told me his name.”

“Must be one bad motherfucker, he gotta send little albino bitches out to do his dirty work. Must be one mean-ass son of a whore.”

When it talks, the Gynander’s lips don’t move, but its chin jiggles loosely, and its blue-grey cheeks bulge a little. Where its eyes should be there’s nothing at all, blackness to put midnight at the bottom of the sea to shame. And Dancy knows about eyes, windows to the soul, so she looks at the hurricane lamp instead.

“Maybe he ain’t no angel. You ever stop and let yourself think about that, Dancy? Maybe he’s a monster, too.”

When she doesn’t answer, it pokes her again, harder than before, drawing blood with its ebony claw; warm crimson trickle across her white shoulder, precious drops of her life wasted on the cellar floor, and she stares deep into the flame trapped inside the glass chimney. Her mother’s face hidden in there somewhere, and a thousand summer-bright days, and the fiery sword her angel carries to divide the truth from lies.

“Maybe you got it turned ’round backwards,” the Gynander says and sets the lamp down on the floor. “Maybe what you *think* you know, you don’t know at all.”

“I knew right where to find you, didn’t I?” Dancy asks it, speaking very quietly and not taking her eyes off the lamp.

“Well, yeah, now that’s a fact. But someone like me, you know how it is. Someone like me always has enemies. Besides the angels, I mean. And word gets around, no matter how careful – ”

“Are you *afraid* to kill me?” she interrupts. “Is that it?”

And there’s a loud and sudden flutter from the Gynander’s chest, then, like a dozen mockingbirds sewn up in there and wanting out, frantic wings beating against that leather husk. It leans closer, scalding carrion breath and the fainter smell of alcohol, the eager *snik*, *snik*, *snik* of its sharp white

teeth, but Dancy keeps staring into the flickering heart of the hurricane lamp.

“Someone like you,” she says, “needs to know who its enemies are. Besides the angels, I mean.”

The Gynander hisses through its teeth and slips a hand around her throat, its palm rough as sandpaper, its needle claws spilling more of her blood.

“Patience, Snow White,” it sneers. “You’ll be dead a long, long time. I’ll wear your pretty alabaster skin to a thousand slaughters, and your soul will watch from Hell.”

“Yeah,” Dancy says. “I’m starting to think you’re gonna talk me to death,” and she smiles for the beast, shuts her eyes, and the afterimage of the lamp flame bobs and swirls orange in the dark behind her lids.

“You’re still alive ’cause I still got things to *show* you, girl,” the Gynander growls. “Things those fuckers, those *angels*, ain’t ever bothered with, ‘cause they don’t want you to know how it is. But if you’re gonna fight with monsters, if you’re gonna play saint and martyr for cowards out that send children to do their killing, you’re gonna have to see it *all*.”

Its grip on her throat tightens, only a little more pressure to crush her windpipe, a careless flick of those claws to slice her throat, and for a moment Dancy thinks maybe she’s won after all.

“This whole goddamn world is *my* enemy,” the thing says. “Mine and yours both, Dancy Flammarion.”

And then it releases her, takes the lamp and leaves her alive, alone, not even capable of taunting a king of butchers into taking her life. Dancy keeps her eyes closed until she hears the trapdoor slam shut and latch, until she’s sure she’s alone again, and then she rolls over onto her back and stares up at the blackness that may as well go on forever.

After the things that happened in Bainbridge, Dancy hitched the long asphalt ribbon of U.S. 84 to Thomasville and Valdosta, following the highway on to Waycross. Through the swampy, cypress-haunted south Georgia nights, hiding her skin and her pink eyes from the blazing June sun when she could, hiding herself from sunburn and melanoma and blindness. Catching rides with truckers and college students, farmers and salesmen, rides whenever she was lucky and found a driver who didn’t think she

looked too strange to pick up, maybe even strange enough to be dangerous or contagious. And when she was unlucky, Dancy walked.

The last few miles, gravel and sandy red-dirt back roads between Waycross and the vast Okefenokee wilderness, *all* of those miles unlucky, all of those on foot. She left the concrete and steel shade of the viaduct almost two hours before sunset, because the angel said she should. This time it wouldn't be like Bainbridge or the Texaco Station. This time there would be sentries, and this time she was expected. Walking right down the middle of the road because the weedy ditches on either side made her nervous; anything could be hiding in those thickets of honeysuckle and blackberry briars, anything hungry, anything terrible, anything at all. Waiting patiently for her beneath the deepening pine and magnolia shadows, and Dancy carried the old carving knife she usually kept tucked way down at the bottom of her duffel bag, held it gripped in her right hand and watched the close and darkening woods.

When the red-winged blackbird flapped noisily out of the twilight sky and landed on the dusty road in front of her, Dancy stopped and stared at it apprehensively. Scarlet splotches on its wings like fresh blood or poisonous berries, and the bird looked warily back at her.

"Oh, Jesus, you gotta be pullin' my leg," the blackbird said and frowned at her.

"What's your problem, bird?" Dancy asked, gripping the knife a little tighter than before.

"I mean, we wasn't expecting no goddamn St. George on his big white horse or nothin', but for crying out loud."

"You knew I was coming here tonight?" she asked the bird and glanced anxiously at the trees, the sky, wondering who else might know.

"Look, girly, do you have any idea what's waitin' for you at the end of this here road? Do you even have the foggiest notion?"

"This is where he sent me. I go where my angel sends me."

The blackbird cocked its head to one side and blinked at her.

"Oh, Lord and butter," the bird said.

"I go where my angel tells me. He shows me what I need to know."

The blackbird glanced back over the red patch on its shoulder at the place where the dirt road turned sharply, disappearing into a towering cathedral of kudzu vines. It ruffled its feathers and shook its head.

“Yeah, well, this time I think somebody up there must’a goofed. So you just turn yourself right around and get a wiggle on before anyone notices.”

“Are you testing me? Is this a temptation? Did the monsters send you?”

“*What?*” the bird squawked indignantly and hopped a few inches closer to Dancy. She raised her carving knife and took one step backwards.

“Are you trying to stop me, bird? Is that what you’re doing?”

“No. I’m trying to *save* your dumb ass, you simple twit.”

“Nobody can save me,” Dancy said and looked down at her knife. In the half-light, the rust on the blade looked like old dried blood. “Maybe once they might’ve, but no one can save me now. That’s not the way this story ends.”

“Go *home,* little girl,” the bird said and hopped closer. “Run away home before it smells you and comes lookin’ for its supper.”

“I don’t have a home. I go where the angel tells me to go, and he told me to come here. He said there was something terrible hiding out here, something even the birds of the air and the beasts of the field are scared of, something I have to stop.”

“With *what?* That old knife there?”

“Did you call me here, blackbird?”

“Hell no,” the bird cawed at her, angry, and glanced over its shoulder again. “Sure, we been prayin’ for someone, but not a loopy albino kid with a butcher knife.”

“I have to hurry now,” Dancy said. “I don’t have time to talk anymore. It’s getting dark.”

The bird stared up at her for a moment, and Dancy stared back at it, waiting for whatever was coming next, whatever she was meant to do or say, whatever the bird was there for.

“Hairy damn Jehoshaphat, you’re really goin’ through with this,” it said finally, and she nodded. The blackbird sighed a very small, exasperated sigh and pecked once at the thick dust between its feet.

“Follow the road, past that kudzu patch there, and the old well, all the way to down to – ”

“I know where I’m going, bird,” Dancy said and shifted the weight of her duffel bag on her shoulder.

“Of course you do. Your *angel* told you.”

“The old blue trailer at the end of the road,” Dancy whispered. “The blue house trailer with three old refrigerators in the front yard.” In the trees, fireflies had begun to wink on and off, off and on, a thousand yellow-green beacons against the gathering night. “Three refrigerators and a broken-down truck.”

“Then you best shove in your clutch, girl. And don’t think for a minute that they don’t know you’re comin’. They know everything. They know the number of stars in the heavens and how many days left till the end of time.”

“This is what I do,” she told the bird and stepped past him, following the road that led to the blackness coiled like a jealous, ancient serpent beneath the summer sky.

Sometime later, when the Gynander finally comes back to her, it’s carrying a small wooden box that it holds out for Dancy to see. Wood like sweet, polished chocolate and an intricate design worked into the lid – a perfect circle filled in with a riot of intersecting lines to form a dozen or more triangles, and on either side of the circle there was a waning or waxing half-moon sickle. She blinks at the box in the unsteady lantern light, wondering if the design is supposed to mean something to her, if the monster thinks that it will.

“Pretty,” Dancy says without enthusiasm. “It’s a pretty box you got there.”

The Gynander makes a hollow, grumbling sound in its throat, and the dead skin hiding its true face twitches slightly.

“You never saw that before?” it asks her and taps at the very center of the circular design with the tip of one claw. “You never saw that anywhere else?”

“No. Can I please have a drink of water?”

“Your *angel* never showed it to you?”

“No,” Dancy says again, giving up on the water, and she goes back to staring at the rootsy ceiling of the cellar. “I never saw anything like that before. Is it some sort of hex sign or something? My grandma knew a few of those. She’s dead.”

“But you’ve never seen it before?”

“That’s what I said.”

The Gynander sits down in the dirt beside her, sets the lamp nearby, and she can feel the black holes where its eyes should be watching her,

wary nothingness peering suspiciously out from the slits in its mask.

"This box belonged to Sinethella."

"Who?"

"The woman that you *killed* last night," the Gynander growls, beginning to sound angry again.

"I didn't kill a woman," Dancy says confidently. "I don't kill people."

"It's carved from a type of African cedar tree that's been extinct for two thousand years," the Gynander says, ignoring Dancy, and its crackling voice makes her think of dry autumn leaves and fire. "And she carried this box for eleven millennia. You got any idea what that means, child?"

"That she was a lot older than she looked," Dancy replies, and the Gynander grunts and puts the box down roughly on her chest. It's heavy for its size, and cold, like a small block of ice, and suddenly the musty cellar air smells like spices – cinnamon, basil, sage, a few others that Dancy doesn't immediately recognize or has never smelled before.

"Get that thing off me," she tells the monster. "Whatever it is, I don't want it touching me. It isn't clean."

"Next to Sinethella," the Gynander says, "I'm nothing, nothing at all. Next to her, I'm just a carny freak. So why did you come for me instead of her?"

"I go where my angel leads me. He shows me – "

"In a moment, Dancy Flammarion, I'm going to open up this box here and let you see what's inside."

"Get it off me. It stinks."

The Gynander grunts, then leans very close to Dancy and sniffs at her; something almost like a tongue, the dark, unhealthy color of indigo or polk-salad berries, darts out from between its shriveled lips and tastes the cellar air.

"That's sort'a the pot callin' the kettle black, don't you think? When's the last time *you* had a bath, Snow White?"

Dancy shuts her eyes, praying that her angel will come, after all, that he'll appear in a whirling storm of white, white feathers and hurricane wind, and take her away from this awful place. She imagines herself in his arms, flying high above the swamps and pine barrens, safe in the velvet and starlight spaces between the moon and earth.

I've done my best, she thinks, trying not to imagine what's waiting for her inside the freezing wooden box pressing painfully down on her chest.

I've done my best, and none of these things can ever touch my immortal soul.

"When men still huddled in their own filth," the Gynander says, "and worshipped the sun because they were too afraid to face the night, she walked the wide world, and nobody and nothin' stood against her. She was a goddess, almost."

"I saw her with my own eyes," Dancy whispers. "I saw exactly what she was."

"You saw what you were told to see."

Sailing with her angel high above the winding black waters of the Okefenokee, above the booming voices of bull alligators and the nervous ears of marsh rabbits, safe in his arms because she's done the best that she can do. And he would tell her that, and that she doesn't have to be strong anymore. Time now to lie down and die, finally, time to be with her grandmother and mother in Paradise, no more lonely roads, no more taunts for her pink eyes and alabaster skin. No more monsters. The angel's wings would sound like redemption, and she might glance down between her feet to see the Gynander's blue house trailer blazing in the night.

"It'll be nothing but ashes by morning," she'd say, and the angel would smile and nod his head.

"The first time Sinethella brought this box to me, first time she opened it and let me have a peek inside, I thought that I would surely die. I thought my heart would burst."

There are no more monsters left in the world, the angel would say to her as they flew across the land, east towards the sea. *You don't have to be afraid anymore. You can rest now, Dancy.*

"She read me a poem, before she let me look inside," the Gynander says. "I never was much for poetry, but I still remember this one. Hell, I'll remember this one till the day I die."

She would ask her angel about the box, and he would tell her not to worry. The box was destroyed. Or lost in the swamp in some pool so deep only the catfish will ever see it. Or locked away forever in the inviolable vaults of Heaven.

"*But from my grave across my brow,*" the Gynander whispers, "*plays no wind of healing now, and fire and ice within me fight, beneath the suffocating night.*"

Open your eyes, Dancy, the angel says, and she does, not afraid of falling anymore, and the Gynander opens the box sitting on her chest. Far, far away, there's a sound like women crying, and the ebony and scarlet light that spills from the cedar box wraps Dancy tight in its searing, squirming tendrils, and slowly, bit by bit, drags her away.

Dancy walked through the long, dark tunnel formed by the strangling kudzu vines, the broad green leaves muffling her footsteps, the heavy lavender flowers turning the air to sugar. She moved as quickly as she dared, wishing now that the blackbird had come with her, wishing she'd gotten an earlier start. Then there would still be a few bright shafts of late afternoon sunlight to pierce the tunnel of vines. Surrounded by the droning scream of cicadas, the songs of crickets and small peeping frogs hidden in amongst the rotten branches and trunks of the oaks that the kudzu long ago took for its skeleton, she counted her paces, like rosary beads, something to mark distance and occupy her mind, something to keep her focused and moving. No more than a hundred feet from one end to the next, a hundred feet at the most, but it might as well have been a mile. Halfway through, she reached a spot where the air was as cold as a January morning, air so cold her breath fogged, and Dancy jumped backwards, hugging herself and shivering.

Too late, she thought. *It knows I'm coming now,* realizing that the forest around her had gone completely quiet, not one insect or amphibian voice, no twilight birdsongs left to break the sudden silence.

Reluctantly, she held a hand out, penetrating the frigid curtain of air again, a cold that could burn, that could freeze living flesh to stone. She drew a deep breath and stepped quickly through it.

Beyond the vines, the blue house trailer was sitting there alone in a small weedy clearing, just like she'd seen it in her dreams, just exactly the way the angel had shown it to her. Light spilled from the windows and the door standing wide open like a welcome sign – *Come on in, I've been waiting for you, Dancy Flammarion.*

She set her duffel bag down on the ground and looked first at her knife and then back to the blue trailer. Even the shimmering, mewling things she'd faced back in Bainbridge, even they were afraid of *this* haunted place, something so terrible inside those aluminum walls that even boogeymen and goblins were afraid to whisper its name. Dancy glanced up at the

summer sky, hoping the angel might be there, watching over her, but there were only a few dim and disinterested stars.

Well, what are you waiting on? the trailer seemed to whisper.

“Nothing,” she said. “I’m not waiting on anything.”

She walked past the three refrigerators, the burned-out carcass of the old Ford pickup, a propane tank, and climbed the cinder-block steps to stand in the open doorway. For a moment, there was light was so bright that she thought it might blind her, might shine straight into her head and burn her brain away, and Dancy squinted through the tears streaming from the corners of her eyes. Then the light seemed to ebb, dimming enough that she could make out the shoddy confusion of furniture crammed into the trailer: a sofa missing all its cushions, a recliner the color of Spanish moss, and a coffee table buried beneath dirty plates, magazines, chicken bones, beer cans, and overflowing ashtrays. A woman in a yellow raincoat was sitting in the recliner, watching Dancy and smiling. Her eyes were very green and pupilless, a statue’s carved jade eyes, and her shaggy black hair fell about her round face in tangled curls.

“Hello there, Dancy,” she said. “We were beginning to think that you wouldn’t make it.”

“Who are you?” Dancy asked, confused, and raised her knife so she was sure the woman could see it. “You’re not supposed to be here. No one’s supposed to be here but – ”

“I’m not? Well, someone should have told me.”

The woman stood up, slipping gracefully, slowly, from the grey recliner, her bare feet on the linoleum floor, and Dancy could see she wasn’t wearing anything under the coat.

“Not exactly what you were expecting, am I?” she said, sounding pleased with herself, and she took a single step towards Dancy. Beneath the bright trailer lights, her bare olive skin glinted wetly, skin as smooth and perfect as oil on deep, still water.

“Stop,” Dancy warned her and jabbed the knife at the air between herself and the woman.

“No one here wants to hurt you,” she said and smiled wider so that Dancy could see her long sharp teeth.

“I didn’t come for you,” Dancy said, trying hard to hide the tremble in her voice, because she knew the woman wanted her to be afraid. “I don’t even know who you are.”

“But I know who *you* are, Dancy. News travels fast these days. I know all about what you did in Bainbridge, and I know what you came here to do tonight.”

“Don’t make me hurt you, too.”

“No one has to get hurt. Put the knife down, and we can talk.”

“You’re just here to distract me, so *it* can run, so it can escape, and then I’ll have to find it all over again.”

The woman nodded and looked up at the low ceiling of the trailer, her green eyes staring directly into that flood of white light filling the tiny room.

“You have a hole inside you,” she said, her smile beginning to fade. “Where your heart should be, there’s a hole so awfully deep and wide, an abyss in your soul.”

“That’s not true,” Dancy whispered.

“Yes, it is. You’ve lost everything, haven’t you? There’s nothing left in the world that you love and certainly nothing that loves you.”

And Dancy almost turned and ran, then, back down the cinder-block steps into the arms of the night, not prepared for this strange woman and her strange, sad voice, the secret things she had no right to know or ever say out loud. Not fair, the angel leaving this part out, not fair, when she’s always done everything he asked of her.

“You think that *he* loves you?” the woman asked. “He doesn’t. Angels love no one but themselves. They’re bitter, selfish things, every one of them. They resent all men and women.”

“Shut up.”

“But it’s the truth, dear. Cross my heart. Angels are nothing but spiteful – ”

“I said to *shut up*.”

The woman narrowed her eyes, still staring up at the ceiling, peering into the light reflecting off her glossy skin.

“You’ve become their willing puppet, their doll,” she sighed. “And, like the man said, they have made your life no more than a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. Nothing whatsoever.”

Dancy gripped the carving knife and took a hesitant step towards the woman.

“You’re a liar,” she said. “You don’t have any idea what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, but I *do*,” the woman replied, lowering her head and turning to gaze at Dancy with those startling, unreal eyes. “I know so very many things. I can show you, if you want to see. I can show you the faces of God, the moment you will die, the dark places behind the stars,” and she shrugged off the yellow raincoat, and it slipped to the linoleum floor.

Where her breasts should have been there were wriggling, tentacled masses instead, like the fiery heads of sea anemones, surrounding hungry, toothless mouths.

“There is almost no end to the things I can show you,” the woman said. “Unless you’re too afraid to see.”

Dancy screamed and lunged towards the naked woman, all of her confusion and anger and disgust, all of her fear, flashing like steam to blind, forward momentum, and she swung the rusty knife, slashing the woman’s throat open a couple of inches above her collarbones. The sudden, bright spray of blood across Dancy’s face was as cold as water drawn from a deep well, and she gasped and retreated to the door of the trailer. The knife slid from her hand and clattered against the aluminum threshold.

“You *cut* me,” the woman sputtered, dismayed, and now there was blood trickling from her lips, too, blood to stain those sharp teeth pink and scarlet. Her green eyes had gone wide, swollen with surprise and pain, and she put one hand over the gash in her throat, as if to try and hide the wound hemorrhaging in time to her heart.

“You did it,” she said. “You really fucking did it,” and then the tentacles on her chest stopped wriggling, and she crumpled to the floor beside the recliner.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Dancy asked the angel, even though she knew it probably wasn’t listening. “Why didn’t you tell me she would be here, too?”

The woman’s body shuddered violently and then grew still, lying on top of the discarded raincoat, her blood spreading out across the floor like a living stain. The white light from the ceiling began to dim and, a moment later, winked out altogether, so that Dancy was left standing in the dark, alone in the doorway of the trailer.

“What have you done to her?” the Gynander growled from somewhere close, somewhere in the yard behind Dancy, its heavy, plodding footsteps coming closer, and she murmured a silent, doubtful prayer and turned to face it.

Unafraid of falling, but falling nonetheless, as the living light from the wooden box ebbs and flows beneath her skin, between the convolutions of her brain. Collapsing into herself, that hole where her heart should be, that abyss in her soul, and all the things she's clung to for so long, the handholds clawed into the dry walls of her mind, melt beneath the corrosive, soothing voices of the light.

Where is it I'm going? she asks, and the red and black tendrils squeezing her smaller and smaller, squeezing her away, reply in a hundred brilliant voices – *Inside,* they say, and *Down,* and *Back,* and finally, *Where the monsters come from.*

I don't have my knife, she says.

You won't need it, the light reassures her.

And Dancy watches herself, a white streak across a star-dappled sky, watches her long fall from the rolling deck of a sailing ship that burned and sank and rotted five hundred years ago. A sailor standing beside her curses, crosses himself, and points at Heaven.

"Did ye see it?" he asks in a terrified whisper, and Dancy can't tell him that she did, and that it was only the husk of her body burning itself away, because now she's somewhere else, high above the masts and stays, and the boat is only a speck in the darkness below, stranded forever in a place where no wind blows and the sea is as still and flat as glass. *As idle as a painted ship, upon a painted ocean.*

Falling, not up or down, but falling farther in, and *Is there a bottom, or a top? Is there ever an end?* she wonders.

Yes, the voices reply. *Yes and no, maybe and that depends.*

Depends on what?

On you, my dear. That depends on you.

And now she stands on a rocky, windswept ledge, grey stone ground smooth and sheer by eons of frost and rain, and the mountains rise up around her until their jagged peaks scrape at the low-slung belly of the clouds. Below her is a long, narrow lake, black as pitch, and in the center of the lake, the ruins of a vast, shattered temple rise from its depths. There are things stranded out there among the ruins, nervous orange eyes watching the waters from broken spires and the safety of crumbling archways. Dancy can hear their small and timorous thoughts, no one desire among them but to reach the shore, to escape this cold, forgotten place – and they *would*

swim, the shore an easy swim for even the weakest among them. But from time to time, the black waters of the lake ripple, or a stream of bubbles rises suddenly to the surface, and there's no knowing what might be waiting down there. What might be hungry. What might have lain starving since time began.

"I want to go back now," Dancy says, shouting to be heard above the howling wind.

There's only one way back, the wind moans, speaking now for the light from the Gynander's box. *And that's straight on to the center.*

"The center of what?" Dancy shouts, and in a moment her voice has crossed the lake and echoed back to her, changed, mocking. *The center of when? Center of where? Of who?*

On the island of ruins, the orange-eyed things mutter ancient, half-remembered supplications and scuttle away into deeper shadows, Dancy's voice become the confirmation of their every waking nightmare, reverberating God-voice to rain the incalculable weight of truth and sentence. And the wind sweeps her away like ash.

"What about her bush?" the orderly asks the nurse as the needle slips into Dancy's arm, and then he laughs.

"You're a sick fuck, Parker, you know that?" the nurse tells him, pulling the needle out again and quickly covering the tiny hole she's left with a cotton ball. "She's just a kid, for Christ's sake."

"Hey, it seems like a perfectly natural question to me. You don't see something like her every day of the week. Guys are curious about shit like that."

"Is that a fact?" the nurse asks the orderly, and she removes the cotton ball from Dancy's arm, staring for a moment at the single drop of crimson staining it.

"Yeah. Something like that."

"Okay, but if you tell anyone, I swear to fucking – "

"Babe, this shit's between me and you. Not a peep, I swear."

"Jesus, I ought'a have my head examined," the nurse whispers and drops the cotton ball and the syringe into a red plastic container labeled infectious waste, then checks Dancy's restraints one by one until she's sure they're all secure.

"Is that me?" Dancy asks the lights, but they seem to have deserted her, left her alone with the nurse and the orderly in this haze of antiseptic

stink and Thorazine.

“Is that me?”

The nurse lifts the hem of Dancy’s hospital gown.

“There,” she says and licks her lips. “Are you satisfied? Does that answer your question?” She sounds nervous and excited at the same time, and Dancy can see that she’s smiling.

“Goddamn,” the orderly mumbles, rubs at his chin and shakes his head. “Goddamn, that’s a sight to see.”

“Poor kid,” the nurse says and lowers Dancy’s gown again.

“Hey, wait a minute, I was gonna get some pictures,” the orderly protests and laughs again.

“Fuck you, Parker,” the nurse says.

“Anytime you’re ready, baby.”

“Go to hell.”

And Dancy shuts her eyes, shuts out the white tile walls and fluorescent glare, pretends that she can’t smell the nurse’s flowery perfume or the orderly’s sweat, that her arm doesn’t ache from the needle and her head isn’t swimming from the drugs.

Closing her eyes. Shutting one door and opening another.

The night air is very cold and smells like pine sap and dirt, night in the forest, and Dancy runs breathless and barefoot over sticks and stones and pine straw, has been running so long now that her feet are raw and bleeding. But she can hear the men on their horses getting closer, shouting to one another, the men and their hounds, and if she dares stop running they’ll be on top of her in a heartbeat.

She stumbles and almost falls, cracks her left shoulder hard against the trunk of a tree. The force of the blow spins her completely around so that she’s facing her pursuers, the few dark boughs left between them and her. One of the dogs howls, the eager sound of something that knows it’s almost won, that can taste her even before its jaws close around her throat.

The light from the box swirls about her like a nagging swarm of nocturnal insects, whirring black wings and shiny scarlet bodies to get her moving again. Each step fresh agony now, but the pain in her feet and legs and chest is nothing next to her terror, the hammer of hooves and the baying hounds, the men with their guns and knives. Dancy cannot remember why they want her dead, what she might have done, if this is only some game or if it’s justice. She can’t remember when this night began or how long she’s

been running. But she knows that none of it will matter in the end, when they catch her, and then the earth drops suddenly away beneath her, and she's falling, really falling, the simple, helpless plummet of gravity. She crashes headlong through the branches of a deadfall and lands in a shallow, freezing stream.

The electric shock of cold water to rip the world around her open once again, the slow burn before it numbs her senseless, the fire before sleep and death to part the seams. She looks back to see the indistinct, frantic tumble of dog bodies already coming down the steep bank after her. Above them, the traitorous pines seem to part for the beautiful man on his tall black horse, his antique clothes, the torch in his hand as bright as the sun rising at midnight. His pale face is bruised with the anger and horror of everything he's seen and done, and everything he will see and do before the dawn.

"*Je l'ai trouvée!*" he shouts to the others. "*Dépêchez-vous!*"

Words Dancy doesn't know, but she *understands* them perfectly well, just the same.

"*La bête! Je l'ai trouvée!*"

And then she looks down at the reflection of the torchlight dancing in the icy, gurgling water, and her reflection there, as well, her albino's face melting in the flowing mirror, becoming the long snout and the frightened, iridescent eyes of a wolf, melting again and now the dead woman from the Gynander's trailer stares back at her. Dancy tries to stand, but she can't feel her legs anymore, and the dogs are almost on top of her, anyway.

"Is this me?" she asks the faces swirling in the stream. "Is this my face, too?" But this *when* and *where* slides smoothly out from beneath her before the light can reply, before snapping dog teeth tear her apart. She's caught up in the implosion again, swallowed whole by her own disintegration.

"They're all dead," the nurse says, and her white shoes squeak loud against the white floor. "Cops up in Milligan think maybe she had something to do with it."

"No shit?" the orderly says. He's standing by the window, looking out at the rain, drawing circles in the condensation with his index finger. Circles and circles inside circles. "Where the hell's Milligan?"

"If you don't know already, trust me, you don't want to know."

Far away, the beautiful man on his black horse fires a rifle into the night.

“How old were you then?” the psychiatrist asks Dancy. She doesn’t answer him right away, stares instead at the clock on the wall, wishing she could wait him out. Wishing there was that much time in the universe, but he has more time than she does. He keeps it nailed like Jesus to his office wall and doles it out in tiny paper cups, a mouthful at a time.

“Dancy, how old were you that night your mother took you to the fair?”

“Does it matter?” she asks him, and the psychiatrist raises his eyebrows and shrugs his bony old man’s shoulders.

“It might,” he says.

And the fair unfurls around her, giddy violence of colored lights and calliope wails, cotton-candy taffy air, sawdust air, barkers howling like drunken wolves, and the mechanical thunk and clank and wheeze of the rides. Her mother has an arm around her, holding her close as the sea of human bodies ebbs and surges about them. Dancy thinks this must be Hell. Or Heaven. Too much of everything good and everything bad all shoved together into this tiny field, a deafening, swirling storm of laughter and screams. She wants to go home, but this is a birthday present, so she smiles and pretends that she isn’t afraid.

“You didn’t want to hurt your mother’s feelings,” the psychiatrist says and chews on the end of a yellow pencil. “You didn’t want her to think you weren’t having fun.”

“Look, Dancy,” her mother says. “Have you ever seen anything like that in your whole life?”

A clown on stilts, tall as a tree, strides past them, wading stiffly through the crowd. He looks down as Dancy looks up, and the clown smiles at her, revealing the real smile behind his painted smile, but she doesn’t smile back. She can see his shadow, the thing hiding in his shadow, its spidery-long legs and half-moon smile, its eyes like specks of molten lava burning their way out of its skull.

Dancy looks quickly down at the ground, trampled sawdust and mud, cigarette butts and a half-eaten candy apple.

“Get a load of her, will you?” a man says and laughs.

“Hey, girly. You part of the freak show or what?”

“‘Course she is. She’s one of the albinos. I saw the poster. They got a whole albino family. They got a boy that’s half-alligator and a stuffed cow with two heads. They got a Chinese ’maphrodite.”

“They ain’t got no cow with two heads. That’s a damn fake.”

“Well, *she* ain’t no fake, now is she?”

And then her mother is shoving a path through the crowd, towing Dancy after her, trying to get away from the two men, but they follow close behind.

“Slow up, lady,” one of them shouts. “We just want to get a good look at her. We’ll even pay you.”

“Yeah, that’s right,” the other one shouts, and now everyone is staring and pointing. “We’ll pay. How much just to look? We ain’t gonna touch.”

The psychiatrist taps his pencil against his chin and helps Dancy watch the clock. “Were you mad at her afterwards, for taking you to the fair?” he asks.

“That was a long time ago,” Dancy replies. “It was my birthday present.”

The psychiatrist takes a deep breath and exhales slowly, makes a whistling sound between his front teeth.

“We never went anywhere, so she took me to the fair for my birthday.”

“Did you know about freak shows, Dancy? Did your mother warn you about them before you went to the fair?”

“What’s the difference between freaks and monsters?” she asks the psychiatrist.

“Monsters aren’t real,” he says. “That’s the difference. Why? Do you think you’re a monster? Has anyone ever told you that you’re a monster?”

She doesn’t answer him. In only five more minutes she can go back to her room and think about anything she wants, anything but carnivals and grinning not-clowns on stilts and the way the two men stalked them through the crowd, anything but freaks and monsters. In the forest, the man fires his rifle again, and this time the shot tears a hole in the psychiatrist’s face, so Dancy can see shattered bone and torn muscle, his sparkling silver teeth and the little metal gears and springs that move his tongue up and down. He drops the pencil, and it rolls underneath his desk. She wants to ask him if it hurts, being shot, having half your face blown off like that, but he hasn’t stopped talking, apparently too busy asking her questions to care if he’s hurt.

“Have you ever been afraid that she took you there to get rid of you, to leave you with the other freaks?”

And all the world goes white, a suffocating white where there is no sky and no earth, nothing to divide the one from the other, and the Arctic wind shrieks in her ears, and snow stings her bare skin. Not the top of the world, but somewhere very near it, a rocky scrap of land spanning a freezing sea, connecting continents in a far-off time of glaciers. Dancy wants to shut her eyes. Then, at least, there would only be black, not this appalling, endless white, and she thinks about going to sleep, drifting down to someplace farther inside herself, the final still point in this implosion, down beyond the cold. But she knows that would mean death, in this place, this *when*, some mute instinct to keep her moving, answering to her empty belly when she only wants to be still.

"*Ce n'est pas un loup!*" the man on his horse shouts to the others in his company, and Dancy peers over her shoulder, but she can't see him anywhere. Nothing at all back there but the wind-blown snow, and she wonders how he could have possibly followed her to this time and place, when he won't even be born for another thirteen thousand years. The storm picks his voice apart and scatters it across the plains.

With the impatient wind at her back, hurrying her along, Dancy stumbles on ahead, helpless to do otherwise.

She finds the camp just past a line of high granite boulders, men and women huddled together in the lee of the stones, a ragged, starving bunch wrapped in bear hides. She smells them before she sees them – the soot of their small, smoky fires, the oily stink of their bodies, the faint death smell from the skins they wear. She slips between the boulders, sure-footed, moving as quietly as she can, though they could never hear her coming over the wind. The wind that blows her own scent away, and she crouches above them and listens. The men clutching their long spears, the women clutching their children, and all eyes nervously watching the white-out blur beyond the safety of the fires.

Dancy doesn't need to understand their language to read their minds, the red and ebony light coiled tight inside her head is there to translate their hushed words, their every fearful thought, to show her the hazy nightmares they've fashioned from the shadows and the wailing blizzard. They whisper about the strange creature that has been trailing them for days, tracking them across the ice, the red-eyed demon like a young girl carved from the snow itself. Their shaman mumbles warnings that they must have trespassed into some unholy place protected by this spirit of the storms, but

most of the men ignore him. They've never come across any beast so dangerous it doesn't bleed.

Crouched there among the boulders, her teeth chattering, Dancy gazes up into the swirling snow. The light leaks out of her nostrils and twines itself in the air above her head like a dozen softly glowing serpents.

They will come for you soon, it says. *If you stay here, they'll find you and kill you.*

"Will they?" Dancy asks, too cold and hungry and tired to really care, one way or the other, and *Yes,* the light replies.

"Why? I can't hurt them. I couldn't hurt them if I wanted to."

The light breaks apart into a sudden shower of sparks, bright drops of brilliance that splash against each other and bounce off the edges of the boulders. In a moment, they come together again, and the woman from the Gynander's trailer, the woman in the yellow raincoat that she knows isn't a woman at all, steps out of the gloom and stands nearby, watching Dancy with her green eyes.

"It only matters that they are *afraid* of you," she says. "Maybe you could hurt them, and maybe you could not, but it only matters that they are afraid."

"I killed you," Dancy says. "You're dead. Go away."

"I only wanted you to see," the woman says and glances down at the camp below the boulders. "Sometimes we forget what we are and why we do the things we do. Worse, sometimes we never learn."

"It won't make any difference," Dancy growls at her, and the woman smiles and nods her head. Her raincoat flutters and flaps loudly in the wind, and Dancy tries hard not to look at the things writhing on her bare chest.

"It might," the woman says. "Someday, when you can't kill the thing that frightens you. When there's nowhere left to run. Think of it as a gift."

"Why would you give *me* a gift?"

"Because you gave me one, Dancy Flammarion," and then the woman blows apart in the wind, and Dancy shivers and watches as the glittering pieces of her sail high into the winter sky and vanish.

"Is it over now?" Dancy asks the light, and in a moment it answers her.

That depends, it says. *Is it ever over?* it asks, but Dancy is already tumbling back the way she's come. Head over heels, ass over tits, and when

she opens her eyes, an instant later, an eternity later, she's staring through the darkness at the ceiling of the Gynander's cellar.

Dancy coughs and rolls over onto her left side, breathing against the stabbing, sharp pain in her chest, and there's the box sitting alone in the dust, its lid closed now. The dark varnished wood glints dull in the orange light from the hurricane lantern hanging nearby, and whatever might have come out of the box has been locked away again. She looks up from the floor, past the drooping, empty husks on their hooks and the Gynander's workbenches. The creature is watching her from the other side of the cellar.

"What did you see?" it asks her, and she catches a guarded hint of apprehension in its rough voice.

"What was I supposed to see?" Dancy asks back, and she coughs again. "What did you think I'd see?"

"That's not how it works. It's different for everyone."

"You wanted me to see things that would make me doubt what the angel tells me."

"It's different for everyone," the Gynander says again and draws the blade of a straight razor slowly across a long leather strap.

"But that's what you wanted, wasn't it? That's what you hoped I'd see, because that's what you saw when she showed you the box."

"I never talked to no angels. I always made a point of that."

And Dancy realizes that the nylon ropes around her ankles and wrists are gone, and her knife is lying on the floor beside the box. She reaches for it, and the Gynander stops sharpening its razor and looks at her.

"Sinethella wanted to die, you know," it says. "She'd been wanting to die for ages. She'd heard what you did to them folks over in Bainbridge, and down there in Florida. I swear, child, you're like something come riding out of a wild west movie, like goddamn Clint Eastwood, you are."

Dancy sits up, a little dizzy from lying down so long, and wipes the rusty blade of her carving knife on her jeans.

"Like in that one picture, *High Plains Drifter,* where that nameless stranger fella shows up acting all holier than thou. The whole town thinks they're using him, but turns out, see, it's really the other way round. Turns out, maybe he's the most terrible thing there is, and maybe *good*'s a whole lot worse to have after your ass than evil. 'Course, *you* have a name."

“I haven’t seen too many movies,” Dancy says, though, in truth, she’s never seen a single one. She glances from the Gynander to the wooden box to the lantern and back to the Gynander.

“I just want you to understand that she wasn’t no two-bit, backwoods haint,” it says and starts sharpening the straight razor again. “Not like me. I just want you to know ain’t nothing happened here she didn’t *want* to happen.”

“Why did you untie me?”

“Why don’t you trying asking that angel of yours? I thought it had all the answers. Hell, I thought that angel of yours was all over the truth like flies on dog shit.”

“She told you to let me go?”

The Gynander makes a sound like sighing and lays the leather strap aside, then holds the silver razor up so it catches a little of the stray lantern light. Its stolen face sags and twitches slightly.

“Not exactly,” it says. “Ain’t nothin’ that easy, Snow White.”

Dancy stands up, her legs stiff and aching, and she lifts the hurricane lantern off its nail.

“Then you want to die, too,” she says.

“Not by a long sight, little girl. But I do like me some sport now and then. And Sinethella said you must be a goddamn force of nature, a regular shatterer of worlds, to do the things you been getting away with.”

“What I saw in there,” Dancy says, and she cautiously prods at the box with the toe of one shoe. “It doesn’t make any difference. I know it was just a trick.”

“Well, then what’re you waiting for,” the thing whispers from the lips of its shabby patchwork skin. “Show me what you got.”

The fire crackles and roars at the night sky lightening slowly towards dawn. Dancy sits on a fallen log at the side of the red dirt road leading back to Waycross and watches as the spreading flames begin to devour the leafy walls of the kudzu tunnel.

“Well, I guess you showed me what for,” the blackbird says. It’s perched on the log next to her, the fire reflected in its beady eyes. “Maybe next time I’ll keep my big mouth shut.”

“You think there’s ever gonna be a next time?” Dancy asks without looking away from the fire.

“Lord, I hope not,” the birds squawks. “That was just, you know, a figure of speech.”

“Oh. I see.”

“Where you headed next?” the bird asks.

“I’m not sure.”

“I thought maybe the angels – ”

“They’ll show me,” Dancy says, and she slips the carving knife back into her duffel bag and pulls the drawstrings tight again. “When it’s time, they’ll show me.”

And then neither of them says anything else for a while, just sit there together on the fallen pine log, as the fire she started in the cellar behind the trailer burns and bleeds black smoke into the hyacinth sky.

Waycross

Oh, Dancy, my avenging *la pucelle de Dieu*, angel-touched waif. My deluded, pallid paladin. You are that angry sliver of my heart that only wants to cut away, but inevitably ends up slicing my own hands. My monstrous monster slayer. I hear those voices, too. Still, I feel a little bad about the Gynander and Sinethella.

The Dead and the Moonstruck

Beneath Providence, below the ancient yellow house on Benefit Street where silver-eyed vampires sleep away the days and pass their dusty waxwork evenings with Spanish absinthe and stale memories; this house that once belonged to witches, long ago, this house with as many ghosts and secrets and curses as it has spiders and silverfish – beneath the yellow house, at half past midnight on a bitter February night, Mesdames Terpsichore and Mnemosyne are finishing a lecture with corporeal demonstrations. Lessons for ghoul pups and for the children of the Cuckoo – the changeling brats stolen as babies and raised in the warrens – and for an hour the two old hounds have droned on and on and on about the most efficacious methods for purging a corpse of embalming fluid and other funereal preservatives before it can be safely prepared in the kitchens. The skinny, mouse-haired girl named Starling Jane nodded off twice during the lecture, earning a snarl from Madam Mnemosyne and a mean glare from Madam Terpsichore's blazing yellow eyes.

"That's all for tonight," Madam Terpsichore growls, folding shut the leather satchel that holds her scalpels and syringes, her needles and knives. "But every one of you'd best know *all* the purgatives and detoxicants by the morrow. And you, young lady," and now the *ghul* points a long and crooked finger at Starling Jane, one ebony claw aimed straight at her heart. "*You* need to learn that the day, not the classroom, is the proper place for sleeping."

"Yes, ma'am," Starling Jane whispers and keeps her eyes on the dirt floor of the basement, on her bare feet and an ivory scrap of bone protruding from the earth. "It won't happen again."

There's a hushed titter of laughter and guttural yapping from the rest of the class, and Jane pretends that she's only a beetle or a small red worm, something unimportant that can scurry or slither quickly away, something that can tuck itself out of sight in an unnoticed cranny or crevice, and she'll never have to sit through another dissection lecture or be scolded for dozing off again. Madam Mnemosyne silences the muttering class with a glance, but Jane can still feel their eyes on her, and "I'm sorry," she says.

“I should think that you are,” Madam Terpsichore barks. “You’re plenty old enough to know better, child,” and then, to the other students sitting cross-legged on the basement floor, “Mistress Jane’s Third Confirmation is scheduled for the full Hunger Moon, four nights hence. But perhaps she isn’t ready, hmmmm? Perhaps she’ll be found wanting, and the razor jaws will close tight about her hands. Then maybe we’ll have *her* meat on the slab before much longer.”

“And no nasty embalming fluid to contend with,” Madam Mnemosyne adds.

“Ah, she would be sweet,” Madam Terpsichore agrees.

“I’m sorry,” Jane says again. “But I’ll be ready on the moon.”

Madam Terpsichore flares her wide black nostrils, sniffs at the musty cellar air, and her eyes glitter in the candlelight. “See that you are, child,” she says. “It would be a shame to lose another sprout so very soon after young Master Lockheart’s unfortunate rejection,” and then she dismisses the class, and Jane follows all the others from the basement into the old tunnels winding like empty veins beneath the city.

Later, after Elementary Thaumaturgy and Intermediate Necromancy and a rambling, unscheduled address on the history of the upper nightlands by Master Tantalus, visiting Providence from the Boston warrens. After dinner and the predawn free hour, after all the time lying awake in her narrow bunk, wishing she were asleep but afraid to close her eyes, Starling Jane finally drifts out and down, slipping through the familiar dormitory smells of wet masonry and mildew and millipedes, past the snores and grunts and gentle breathing noises of those who aren’t afraid of their dreams. A hundred feet beneath the day-washed pavement of Angell Street, and she spirals easily through velvet folds of consciousness and unconsciousness. Countless bits of senseless, inconsequential remembrance and fancy – simple dreams – leading and misleading her step by step, moment by moment, to the nightmare place she’s visited almost every morning or afternoon for two months.

That place where there is a wide blue sky, and the sun hanging inconceivably bright directly overhead. Where there is grass and the scent of flowers, and she stands at the top of a hill looking down on a sparkling sea.

“You should have stayed with me,” her mother says from somewhere close behind her, and Jane doesn’t turn around, because she doesn’t want to see. “If you’d have stayed with me, I’d have loved you, and you’d have grown up to be a beautiful woman.”

The salt-warm wind off the sea makes waves in the tall grass and whistles past Starling Jane’s ears.

“I would have stayed,” she says, just like she always says. “If they’d have let me. I would have stayed, if I’d had a choice.”

“I knew I’d lose you,” her mother replies. “Before you were even born, I knew the monsters would come and steal you away from me. I knew they’d hide you from me and make you forget my face.”

“How could you have known all that?” Jane asks. Down on the beach, there are children playing with a big yellow-brown dog. They throw pieces of driftwood, and the dog runs after them, and sometimes it brings them back again.

“Oh, I knew, all right,” her mother says. “Trust me, I *knew* what was coming. I heard them in the night, outside my bedroom window, scratching at the glass, wanting in.”

“I have to pass one more test, Mother. I just have to pass one more test, and they’ll let me live.”

“You would have been such a beautiful girl. Just look at what they’ve made of you instead.”

On the beach, the children chase the yellow-brown dog through the surf, laughing and splashing so loudly that Starling Jane can hear them all the way up at the top of the hill.

“They’ll make you a monster, too,” her mother says.

“I wish they could,” Jane mutters to herself, because she knows it doesn’t matter whether or not her mother hears the things she’s saying. “I wish to all the dark gods that they could make me like them. But that’s not what happens. That’s not what happens at all.”

“You could come home. Every night, I sit up, waiting for you to come back, for them to bring you back to me.”

“You shouldn’t do that,” Jane whispers, and the hill rumbles softly beneath her. Down on the beach, the children stop playing and turn towards her. She waves to them, but they don’t seem to see her.

Or they’re afraid of me, she thinks.

“If you fail the test, they might bring you back to me,” her mother says hopefully.

“If I fail, they’ll kill me,” Jane replies. “They’ll kill me and eat me. No one ever goes back, once they’re chosen by the Cuckoo. No one.”

“But you would have been such a beautiful girl,” her mother says again. “I would have given you everything.”

“It’s the last test,” Jane whispers.

Beneath her, the hill rumbles again, and the sea has turned to blood, and there are wriggling white things falling from the sky. On the beach, the children and the yellow-brown dog have vanished.

“I’ll be waiting,” her mother says.

And Jane opens her eyes, tumbling breathlessly back into flesh and bone, and she lies awake until sunset, listening to her heart and the sounds the sleepers make and the faraway din of traffic up on Angell Street.

“You’re scared,” the ghoul pup named Sorrow says, not asking her but telling her, and then he scratches determinedly at his left ear.

“I’m not scared,” Starling Jane tells him, and shakes her head, but she knows it’s a lie and, worse still, knows, too, that *he* knows it’s a lie.

“Sure, and neither was Lockheart.”

“Lockheart wasn’t ready. Everyone knew he wasn’t ready.”

They’re sitting on stools near one of the tall kitchen hearths, scrubbing tin plates clean with wire-bristle brushes, sudsy water up to their elbows and puddled on the cobbles at their feet. The washtub between them smells like soap and grease.

“Would *you* eat me?” she asks Sorrow. And he grunts and drops the plate he was scrubbing back into the washtub, then tugs thoughtfully at the coarse, straw-colored tuft of hair sprouting from the underside of his muzzle.

“That’s not a fair question. You know underlings never get delicacies like that. Not a scrap. You’d be served to Master Danaüs and the – ”

“I was speaking hypothetically,” Jane says and adds another plate to the stack drying in front of the fire. “If they made an exception and you had the opportunity, would you eat me?”

Sorrow stares at her for a long moment, furrows his brow uncertainly and blinks his yellow eyes, and “Wouldn’t you *want* me to?” he asks her, finally.

“It wouldn’t bother you, eating your best friend?”

Sorrow pulls another plate from the washtub and frowns, looking down at the dishwater now instead of Starling Jane. He scrubs halfheartedly at the bits of meat and gravy and potatoes clinging to the dented tin and then drops the plate back into the tub.

“That wasn’t clean, and you know it.”

“It’s just not a fair question, Jane. Of *course*, I’d eat you. I mean, speaking hypothetically and all. I’m not saying I wouldn’t *miss* you, but – ”

“You’d eat me anyway.”

“It’d be awful. I’d probably cry the whole time.”

“I’m sure you would,” Starling Jane says with a sigh, pulling the plate Sorrow didn’t wash out of the tub again. There’s a piece of burnt potato skin big as her thumb stuck to it. “I hope I’d give you indigestion. You’d have it coming.”

“You really are scared,” Sorrow scowls and spits into the washtub.

“You’re a disgusting pig, you know that?”

“Oink,” Sorrow oinks and wrinkles his nostrils.

“I’m *not* scared,” Jane says again, because she needs to hear the words. “There’s no reason for me to be scared. I’ve made it past the Harvest Moon and the full Frost Moon. I know my lessons – ”

“Book lessons don’t get you past the moons. You know that, Jane. Nobody’s ever been confirmed because they got good marks.”

“It doesn’t hurt.”

“It doesn’t help, either.”

“But it doesn’t *hurt*,” Jane snarls at him and flings her wire-bristle brush at his head. Sorrow ducks, and it hits the wall behind him and clatters to the floor.

“You’re crazy,” Sorrow says, and then he hops off his stool, knocking it over in the process. “I might be a pig, but you’re crazy.”

“You *want* me to fail. You want me to fail so you can go through all my things and take whatever you want.”

“You don’t *have* anything I want,” Sorrow barks defensively and takes a quick step backwards, putting more distance between himself and Starling Jane.

“Yes, I do. That owl skull the Bailiff brought me from Salem. You want that. You’ve *told* me more than once that you wish he’d given it to you instead of me.”

“I just said I liked it, that’s all.”

“And that Narragansett Indian arrowhead I found in the tunnels last summer, you want that, too, don’t you?”

“Jane, stop and listen to yourself,” Sorrow pleads and takes another step or two away from the hearth. “I do not want you to fail your Confirmation and die, just so I can have your things. That’s crazy. You’re my *friend*. And I don’t have a lot of friends.”

“Friends don’t eat each other!”

“Someone’s gonna *hear* you,” Sorrow hisses, and holds a long finger up to his thin black lips. “If old Melpomene finds out you’re making such a racket, we’ll both be scrubbing pots and plates from now till Judgment Day,” and he glances nervously over a shoulder into the shadows waiting just beyond the firelight’s reach.

“So maybe I don’t care anymore!” Jane shouts at him, and then she reaches into the washtub and yanks out a particularly filthy plate. “I’d rather spend the rest of my life washing dishes for that old bat than wind up in her stew pot or roasting on her spit with a turnip stuffed in my mouth!”

“You’re *not* going to fail,” Sorrow says, glancing over his left shoulder again. “You’re not going to fail, and no one’s going to eat you.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Sure I do.”

“Go away. Leave me alone,” Jane says, letting the filthy plate slip from her fingers. Soapy, lukewarm dishwater splashes out onto her patchwork apron. “That’s all I want, Sorrow. I want to be alone. I think I’m going to cry, and I don’t want anyone to see. I especially don’t want you to see.”

“You sure?” Sorrow asks. “Maybe I should stay,” and he sits down on the floor as if she’s just agreed with him when she hasn’t. “I don’t mind if you cry.”

“Lockheart wasn’t ready,” she whispers. “That’s the difference. He wasn’t ready, and I am.”

“You bet. I’ve never seen anyone so ready for anything in my whole life.”

“Liar,” Jane says and glares at him. In the hearth, one of the logs cracks and shifts and, for a moment, the fire flares so brightly that Sorrow has to squint until it settles down again.

“I wouldn’t eat you,” he tells her. “Not even if they stewed both your kidneys in crabapples and carrots and parsnips and served them to me with

mint jelly, I wouldn't eat you. I swear."

"Thank you," Jane replies, and she tries to smile, but it comes out more of a grimace than a smile. "I wouldn't eat you, either."

"Are you going to throw anything else at me?"

"No," she says. "I'm not going to throw anything else at you. Not ever," and she gets up and retrieves her brush from the floor behind Sorrow's stool.

In a life filled past bursting with mysteries – a life where the mysterious and the arcane, the cryptic and the magical, are the rule, not the exception – if anyone were to ever ask Starling Jane what one thing she found the *most* mysterious, she would probably say the Bailiff. If he has a name, she's never heard it, this very large, good-natured man with his shiny, bald head and full grey beard, his pudgy link-sausage fingers and rusty iron loop of keys always jangling on his wide belt. Not a vampire nor a ghoul nor any of the other night races, just a man, and Jane's heard rumors that he's a child of the Cuckoo, too, a changeling but also something more than a changeling. And there are other rumors – that he's an exiled demon, or a wizard who's forgotten most of his sorcery, or an ancient, immortal thing no one's ever made up a word for – but to Starling Jane he's just the Bailiff. A link between the yellow house on Benefit Street and other dark houses in other cities, courier for the most precious packages and urgent messages that can be trusted to no one else.

On the last night before her final rite of Confirmation, the ceremony on the night of the full Hunger Moon, the Bailiff returns from a trip to New Orleans, and after his business with the dead people upstairs and his business with the hounds downstairs, he takes his dinner in the long candlelit dining room where the changeling children and the ghoul pups are fed.

"You'll do fine," he assures Starling Jane, nibbling the last bit of meat from a finger bone. "Everyone gets the shakes before their third moon. It's natural as mold and molars, and don't let no one tell you any different."

Sorrow stops picking his teeth with a thumb claw. "You heard about Lockheart?" he asks the Bailiff.

"Everyone's heard about Lockheart," a she-pup named Melancholy says and rolls her yellow eyes. "Of course he's heard about Lockheart, you slubberdegullion."

Sorrow snorts and bares his eyeteeth at Melancholy. “What the heck’s a slubberdegullion?” he demands.

“If you weren’t one, you’d know,” she replies brusquely, and Sorrow growls and tackles her. A moment later and they’re rolling about on the floor between the dinner tables, a blur of fur and insults and dust and someone starts shouting, “Fight! Fight!” so everyone comes scrambling to see.

Jane keeps her seat and picks indifferently at the green-white mound of boiled cabbage on her plate. “You have heard about Lockheart?” she asks the Bailiff.

“As it so happens, and with all due respect paid to the sesquipedalian Miss Melancholy down there,” and he glances at the commotion on the dining-room floor, “no, my dear, I haven’t.”

“Oh,” Starling says and jabs her cabbage with the bent tines of her fork. “He failed his second.”

“Ah, I see. Well, now, I’d have to say that’s certainly a bloody shame, of one sort or another.”

“He was scared. He froze up right at the start, didn’t even make it past the sword bridge. They had to bring him down in a burlap sack.”

The Bailiff belches and excuses himself. “Was he a friend of yours?” he asks her.

“No,” Jane says. “I always thought he was a disgusting little toad.”

“But now you’re thinking him failing has something to do with you, is that it?”

“Maybe,” Jane replies. “Or maybe I was scared to start with, and that only made it worse.”

On the floor, Melancholy pokes Sorrow in his left eye, and he yelps and punches her in the belly.

“Don’t seem fair, sometimes, does it?” the Bailiff asks, and then he takes a bite of her cabbage.

“What doesn’t seem fair?”

“All these trials for them that never asked to be taken away from their rightful mommas and brought down here to the dark, all these tribulations, while *others* – not naming names, mind you,” but Starling Jane knows from the way he raised his voice when he said “others” that he means Sorrow and Melancholy and all the *ghul* pups in general. “All they have to do is be

born, then watch their p's and q's, keep their snouts clean, and not a deadly deed in sight."

"Madam Terpsichore says nothing's fair, and it's only asking for misery, expecting things to turn out that way."

"Does she now?"

"All the time."

"Well, you listen to your teachers, child, but, on the other hand, Madam Terpsichore never had to face what's waiting down in that pit during the full Hunger Moon, now did she?"

"No," Jane says, pushing her plate over to the Bailiff's side of the table. "Of course not."

"See, that's what really draws the line between you and her, Miss Starling Jane. Not a lot of words written in some old book by gods no one even remembers but the hounds, not the color of your eyes or how sharp your teeth might be. What matters…" and he pauses to finish her cabbage and start on her slice of rhubarb-and-liver pie. Jane pushes Sorrow's plate across the table to the Bailiff, as well.

"Thank you," he says with his mouth full. "I do hate to see good food go to waste. Now, as I was saying, what matters, Miss Jane, what you need to understand come tomorrow night…" and then he stops again to swallow.

"You really shouldn't talk with your mouth full," Jane says. "You'll choke."

The Bailiff takes a drink from his cup and nods his bald head. Now there are a few beads of red wine clinging to his whiskers. "My manners ain't what they used to be," he says.

"You were saying, what I need to understand…"

The Bailiff stops eating, puts his fork down and looks at her, his moss-green eyes like polished gems from the bottom of a deep stream. "You're a brave girl," he says, and smiles, "and one day soon you'll be a fine, brave woman. *That's* the difference, and that's what you need to understand. Madam Terpsichore won't ever have to prove herself the way you already have. What makes us brave isn't lacking the good sense to be afraid, it's looking back at what we've lived through and seeing if we faced it well. The ghouls are your masters, and don't you ever forget that, but they'll never have your courage, because no one's ever gonna make them walk the plank, so to speak."

And then he reaches into a pocket of his baggy coat and pulls out a small gold coin with a square hole punched in the center. The metal glimmers faintly in the candlelight as he holds it up for Jane to see.

“I want you to have this,” he says. “But not to keep, mind you. No, when you offer your hands up to old Nidhogg’s mouth tomorrow night, I want you to leave this on his tongue. I can’t say why, but it’s important. Now, do you think you can do that for me?”

Starling nods her head and takes the coin from his hand. “It’s very pretty,” she says.

“Don’t you get scared and forget, now. I want you to put that right there on that old serpent’s tongue.”

“I won’t forget. I promise. Put it on his tongue.”

The Bailiff smiles again and goes back to eating, and Jane holds the coin tight and watches Sorrow and Melancholy tumbling about on the floor, nipping at each other’s ears, until Madam Melpomene comes to break up the fight.

In the dream, she watches the children on the beach with their dog, and the crimson thunderheads piling up higher and higher above the darkening sea. Her mother has stopped talking, and, because this has never been part of the dream before, Starling Jane turns to see why. But there’s no one standing behind her now, only the tall grass and the wind whispering furtively through it and the world running on that way forever.

And then there are no more nights left between Starling Jane and the full Hunger Moon, no more anxious days or hours or minutes, because all moons are inevitable and no amount of fear or desire can forestall their coming. This is the year of her Third Confirmation, her time for the Trial of the Serpent, because she’s survived the first two rites, the Trial of Fire and the Trial of Blades. There are no lessons or chores on the day of a trial, for Jane or any other changeling child, and by the appointed hour the warrens have emptied into the amphitheater carved from solid stone one hundred and fifty feet beneath Federal Hill.

Jane wears the long silver robes of passage and waits alone with blind, decrepit Master Solace in a tiny curtained alcove on the northern rim of the pit. The air stinks of wet stone and rot and the myrrh smoldering in a small brass pot on the floor. Her face is a mask of soot and drying blood, the red

and black runes drawn on her skin by Madam Hippodamia, that she might make the descent with all the most generous blessings of the dark gods. From the alcove she can hear the murmuring crowd and knows that Sorrow's out there somewhere, crouched nervously on one of the stone benches, and she wishes she were sitting beside him, and it were someone else's turn to stand before the dragon.

"It's almost time, child," Master Solace barks and blinks at her, his pale, cataract-shrouded eyes the color of butter. "If you are ready, there's nothing to fear."

If I'm ready, she thinks and shuts her eyes tight.

And then the horn, and the ship's bell, and the steady *thump-thump-thump* of the drums begins.

"Walk true," Master Solace says and blinks at her again.

Jane opens her eyes, and the tattered curtain has been pulled back so she can see the torchlight and shadows filling the amphitheater and the pit.

"Walk this path with no doubt in your heart," Master Solace says, and then he ushers Starling Jane out of the alcove to stand on a narrow wooden platform jutting out over the abyss. Above and all around her, the murmuring rises to an excited, expectant crescendo, and *ghul* drum-wraiths hammer at their skins so loudly she wonders that the cavern doesn't collapse from the noise and bury them all alive. *That would be preferable,* she thinks. *That would be easier than dying alone.*

The drumming stops as abruptly as it began, and gradually the murmuring follows suit, and for a moment or two there's no sound from the great chamber but Jane's heartbeat and Master Solace sucking the dull stubs of his teeth. And then one note rings out from the ship's bell, and "All stand," Madam Terpsichore says, shouting to the assembled through her bullhorn.

"Tonight we have come down to this sacred place of truth and choice to witness the deserved confirmation or the just rejection of Mistress Starling Jane of the Providence warrens. It has been eight years since she was delivered to us by the grace of the Cuckoo, and on this night of the full Hunger Moon we shall all know, once and for all, whether she will serve us until the end of her days."

"Watch your step, girl," Master Solace whispers. "It's a long way down," and then Jane hears the curtain drawn shut again, and she knows that he's left her alone on the wooden platform.

“Go down, Starling Jane,” Madam Terpsichore growls. “Go down into the dark and find the hungry jaws of Nidhogg, the dragon that gnaws the very roots of the world tree, drawing ever closer the final days. Find him, changeling, and ask him if you are worthy.”

Then the ghoul bows once before she pulls the mahogany lever on her right, and far overhead secret machineries begin to grind, the hesitant turning of iron wheels, the interlocking teeth of ancient, rusted gears, and somewhere on the surface a trapdoor opens and moonlight pours into this hollow place inside the earth.

“Walk true, Starling Jane,” Madam Terpsichore says, and then passes the bullhorn to an underling before she sits down again.

The moonlight forms a single, brilliant shaft reaching from the vaulted ceiling of the amphitheater to the very bottom of the black pit, argent lunar rays held together by some clever trick of photomancy Jane knows she’ll probably never learn, even if the dragon doesn’t take her hands. The crowd makes no sound whatsoever as she turns right and begins her descent along the steep and rickety catwalk set into the walls of the pit. The drum-wraiths begin drumming again, marking her every footstep with their mallets of bone and ivory.

Starling Jane keeps to the right side of the catwalk, because she’s afraid of falling, because she’s afraid she might look over the edge and lose her balance. She places one foot after the next, and the next, and the next after that, walking as slowly as she dares, spiraling around the pit, and each circuit is smaller than the last so that the distance to the moonbeam shrinks until she could reach out and brush it with her fingertips. The old planks creak and pop beneath her bare feet, and she tries not to imagine how many decades, how many centuries, it’s been since they were anchored to the rock face.

And then, at last, she’s standing at the bottom, only one final moment remaining to carry her from the darkness into the blazing white shaft; Jane hesitates a second, half a second, takes a deep breath and lets it out again, and then she steps into the light of the full Hunger Moon.

It’s stolen my eyes, she thinks. *It’s stolen away my eyes and left me as blind as Master Solace.* This pure and perfect light distilled and concentrated, focused on the dingy reflecting mirror of her soul. It spills over her, dripping from the silver robe, burning away anything less immaculate than itself. She realizes that she’s crying, crying at the simple

beauty of it. When she wipes her cheeks, the light dances in furious motes across the back of her hand, and she sees that she hasn't gone blind after all. So she kneels on the stone, and the dragon rumbles beneath her like an empty belly waiting to be filled.

Above her, the drum-wraiths fall silent.

"It's okay," she whispers. "It's all okay," and death's not such a terrible thing now that she's seen that light, felt it burrowing its way into her, washing her clean. On the ground in front of her there are two holes, each no more than a few inches across and ringed with hammered gold and platinum.

She remembers the Bailiff's coin, gold for gold, and reaches into the deep pocket in the robe where she tucked it safely away before Madam Hippodamia led her down to wait in the tiny myrrh-scented alcove with Master Solace. Gold for gold, and the hole at the center of the coin is not so very different from the twin mouths of the dragon.

"Just get it over with," she says and leans forward, plunging both arms into the holes, the Bailiff's coin clutched tightly in her right hand.

Inside, the holes are warm, and the stone has become flesh, flesh and slime and dagger teeth that eagerly caress her fingers and prick her wrists. Nidhogg's poisonous breath rises from the holes – sulfur and brimstone, ash and acid steam – and Jane opens her hand and presses the coin against the thorny tongue of the dragon. The earth rumbles violently again, and Starling Jane waits for the jaws to snap shut.

But then the pit sighs, making a sound like the world rolling over in its sleep, and there's only cold, hard stone encircling her arms. She gasps, pulls her hands quickly from the holes and stares at them in disbelief, all ten fingers right there in front of her, and only a few scratches, a few drops of dark blood, to prove that there was ever any danger at all.

High above, the amphitheater erupts in a thunderous clamor, a joyful, relieved pandemonium of barks and shouts and clapping hands, howls and laughter and someone ringing the ship's bell again and again.

Jane sits back on her heels and stares up into the moonlight, letting it pour down into her, drinking its impossible radiance through her strangling pinpoint pupils and every pore of her body, letting it fill her against all the endless nights to come, all the uncountable darknesses that lie ahead. When she cannot hold another drop, Starling Jane stands up again, bows once, and only once, to Nidhogg Rootnibbler, exactly the way that Madam

Terpsichore said she should, and then the changeling starts the long walk back up the catwalk to the alcove. With the applause raining down around her and the moonlight in her eyes, it doesn’t seem to take any time at all.

The Dead and the Moonstruck

I’ve said, many times, that all beginnings and all endings are arbitrary inventions. The first appearance of a character is never his, her, or its *beginning*. They must have had lives before. After *Low Red Moon*, I had to go looking for an earlier Starling Jane. I found a lot more than I thought I would. But I’ve never yet eaten one of my friends.

The Daughter of the Four of Pentacles

The brown girl who has spent the last seventy-five years locked away in the attic of the big yellow house on Benefit Street takes a deep breath of the stale, musty air and holds it for several heartbeats. Then she sighs, breathing out stagnation and torpor, and checks her father's pocket watch again. But the hands are still frozen at precisely seven thirty-three and fifteen seconds. She knows that they'll begin to move again just as soon as there's a knock at the underside of the attic's trapdoor, and she shifts impatiently on the wooden milking stool. She wonders who will knock this time, if it will be a man or a woman, a boy or a girl, a vampire or only one of the changelings. Maybe it will be someone who remembers her name, someone who's come before, perhaps even the same person as last time. That happens every now and then, that she gets the same person two or even three times in a row. If she's very lucky, it will be someone who remembers the brown girl's name and why she's here, someone who wants to talk, who'll listen, before the trapdoor is pulled shut again and the hands of her father's pocket watch stop moving.

"I'm ready now," she says very quietly, pretending that there's anyone down there who cares, pretending that she might possess some secret magic that could hurry them along.

Around her the attic is as still as an oil painting. Spiders sit motionless in half-spun webs. A billion dust motes hang like the fixed globes of an astronomer's model of the heavens, moving only when her passing briefly sets them to swirling and tumbling one against the other. If there's time here, it's a cowardly, toothless thing.

"I'm *ready* now," she says again, more forcefully than before, and there's a sudden rap at the trapdoor. She jumps at the sound, almost losing her balance and falling off the stool, her heart pounding in its cage of flesh and bone. The brown girl holds her breath and grips the edges of her seat, her fingertips digging at the wood, and she listens eagerly as iron keys are turned in locks and rusty hasps are thrown back. She glances down at her father's watch and sees that the hour and minute and second hands have all started moving, that forty-three seconds have already passed unnoticed.

The hinges of the trapdoor squeak loud as a pillowcase stuffed with angry mice and a moment later there's a pale, freckled boy with a flickering oil lamp, staring up at her, squinting into the gloom, even as she squints at so much light. She's disappointed that this boy is no one she's ever seen before, but it's a very small disappointment, easily pushed aside and forgotten.

"Hello," the boy says, and she thinks he must be about her age, twelve, maybe thirteen at the most.

"Hello," she replies. "Be careful on that ladder. I think the next to the top rung might be loose."

The boy blinks at her and nods his head. His hair is the color of cinnamon and his eyes are green, not silver, so she knows he must be one of the changelings, because all the vampires have eyes like spilled mercury. He's wearing overalls and a white undershirt.

"I don't think I'm coming all the way up," he says, "so I don't think it matters."

The brown girl's heart sinks and she stands so quickly that she knocks the milking stool over. The sound of it hitting the floor is very loud, and the boy scowls at her and retreats down the ladder a rung or two.

"No, no, don't go yet," she pleads, hastily setting the stool upright and then turning to face him again. "We can talk. We can tell each other stories. You haven't even told me your name."

The boy stares at her, then looks back down the ladder, past his feet, at the landing lost somewhere in the shadows below.

"My name is Airdrie," he tells her.

"I've never heard that name before," she says and takes a cautious step nearer the trapdoor.

"Well, you have now. It's nothing special."

"My name's – " the girl begins, but he cuts her off.

"I *know* your name. You think they'd send me up here without even telling me your name?"

"They might have. They've done it before. The last one, she didn't know my name. I had to tell it to her"

The boy looks at his feet again, then climbs the ladder until he's standing almost at the top. "The last one," he says. "How long ago was that?"

The brown girl looks at her father's watch. "Two minutes and fifty-three seconds ago," she replies. The boy seems confused by her answer, so she adds, "I don't know how long it's been out *there*. In here, it's been two minutes and fifty-three seconds."

"Oh," he says and then sets the lantern down on the attic floor near the edge of the trapdoor. "But it must seem like a lot longer than that to you, right?"

She decides to ignore the question, because it's really not the sort of thing she can afford to think about, all the days and months and years that have passed her by, the discrepancy between the attic and the world rushing past beyond the attic, what her father once called a "temporal contrariety."

"Your name is Hester," the boy says, so maybe he didn't expect her to answer the question anyway. "You're the alchemist's daughter. They've kept you in the attic since August 12, 1929, the day after – "

"My name is *Pearl*," she replies, correcting the boy before he can finish.

He shakes his head and arches his eyebrows skeptically. "Your name's not Pearl," he says. "It's Hester. Why did you tell me your name was Pearl?"

"What did they send me this time?" she asks him, changing the subject. "I hope there's an apple. Or a plum."

"Why did you say your name was Pearl?" the boy persists, and the brown girl shrugs and sits down on the floor between the milking stool and the lantern. The truth is that her father called her Pearl sometimes, but she doesn't want to tell this scowling boy the truth.

"It's just a game," she lies. "I know a lot of games."

"Yeah," the boy says, carefully avoiding the next to last rung at the top of the ladder as be climbs the rest of the way into the attic. He sits on the other side of the trapdoor, opposite the brown girl, and wipes the dust from his hands onto the bib of his overalls. "I guess it helps you pass the time."

"There's no time to pass," she tells him, "but it helps whenever I get bored."

The boy nods, as though he understands what she means when she's fairly certain that he doesn't understand any of it, and then he stares past her into the half-light and murk crouched at her back.

"It's a whole lot bigger up here than I thought it would be," he says and cranes his neck to stare up into the low rafters. The oil lantern's glow

reflects dully off the underside of the wide beams, the corpses of ancient white pines felled and hewn and hauled all the way to Providence from the forests of western Massachusetts. Her father used to tell her stories about how and why the house was built, how these very beams were set in place in 1764, how the complex geometry of rafters, ridge beams, struts, and king posts – triangles set within and against triangles – channeled and refined aetheric energy to create a sort of protective umbrella above the yellow house and the intersecting catacombs beneath its floors.

"Did they send me fruit?" she asks, not wanting to seem impatient, but tired of waiting. "Did they send me sweets?"

The boy reaches into a pocket of his overalls and produces a large paisley handkerchief bundled and tied with a short length of lace ribbon. He passes it to the girl, their fingers brushing above the trapdoor, and the boy quickly pulls his hand back as soon as she's taken the parcel from him. She doesn't ask him what he felt, because she doesn't want to know. Usually, they're careful not to touch her.

The paisley handkerchief is mostly purple, the same purple as the undersides of storm clouds, and the bit of ribbon is white aging towards yellow. She quickly unties the lace and the handkerchief falls open to reveal a single red apple, two candy canes, a pack of Black Jack chewing gum, a tin of sardines, and a blue rubber ball. She picks up the apple and polishes it on the front of her dress, then sets it back down with the rest.

"It's not much, is it?" the boy asks, and when the brown girl looks up at him, he's sitting there, staring intently at the fingers of his right hand, the fingers that brushed hers.

"Oh, it's enough," she replies. "I don't need much. I can make this last until next time. That's another good game, making things last."

The boy named Airdrie looks doubtful, frowns and blows on the tips of his fingers. "Why is your hand so goddamned cold?" he asks. "I swear, I think I got frostbite."

"No, you haven't," she says. "Don't be such a baby." The brown girl examines the rubber ball, glad Miss Josephine remembered that she'd lost the orange one they gave her time before last. Now she can play jacks again, and she promises herself that she'll be more careful about keeping up with this ball than she was about keeping up with the orange one. She bounces it once against the floor and catches it, then returns it to the outspread handkerchief.

The boy stops blowing on his fingers and glares at her. “You don’t even seem to mind,” he says.

“Mind what?” she asks him, sniffing the candy canes to be sure that they’re both clove and not peppermint. “What don’t I mind?”

“Being stuck here all the time. Being kept up here like a prisoner.”

“I’m not a prisoner,” she replies, setting the candy down. “I’m only collateral.”

“You can’t leave,” the boy says. “You aren’t ever allowed to leave the attic. That sure sounds to me like you’re a prisoner.”

“You don’t know the particulars. That’s all.”

“I know your father left you here with Miss Josephine so the ghouls wouldn’t kill him for what he’d done. Everyone in the house knows that. Hell, they know that all the way over in Boston.”

The brown girl wraps everything back up inside the storm-colored paisley handkerchief and then ties the ribbon very tightly so that nothing will spill out when she isn’t looking. She watches the boy for a moment without saying anything at all.

“You’ve been up here more than seventy-five years and you’re telling me it doesn’t bother you?” the boy asks. “You ought to be an old woman and you’re still just a kid.”

“My Poppa’s coming back for me,” the brown girl replies, trying hard to sound sure of herself. She’s starting to wish the boy would climb back down the ladder, pull the trapdoor closed after him, snap all the locks shut, and leave her alone. “He’ll be back, any day now.”

“You still believe that?”

“Is there any reason that I shouldn’t?”

The boy looks up at the rafters again. “You ever climbed up there?” he asks her.

“Sometimes,” she says, but doesn’t elaborate. She has many secret places beneath the roof of the yellow house. Places where she hides the things that mean nothing to anyone but her. Cubby holes, nooks and crannies, fissures in the punky old wood of the beams. Bits of candy and unanswered riddles written on brittle scraps of paper torn from her father’s books. A piece of sage-green soapstone engraved with the names of four of the Nephilim. A cracked horizon mirror from a sextant, the dried petals of a rose from Miss Josephine’s garden.

“It’s sure a lot bigger than I thought it would be,” the boy says again.

The brown girl glances at her father's pocket watch and sees that almost fifteen minutes have passed since the boy knocked at the trapdoor. She can feel the time flowing thick around her now, sticky as molasses, and she tries to imagine how things were before her father left and they shut her away up here in the clever, inviolable maze of their "temporal contrariety." How things were when she was just like everyone else, drifting helpless in time, drowning in it like all the other children racing towards adulthood and their graves. How she ever endured the *weight* of it, pushing her along.

"I want to see the snow globes," the boy says, standing up and brushing dust from the seat of his overalls.

"They're *not* snow globes," the brown girl replies, sure now that she wants him to leave, that she'd rather be alone again without the ticking watch and the suffocating rush of moments. "That's not what they're called."

"That's what Miss Josephine calls them."

"Miss Josephine doesn't know everything."

"Well, I don't really care what they're called or what they're not called, *Hester.* I just want to see them."

This is something new. No one has ever asked her to see her father's work before, the hundreds of crystal orbs that are the reason she's been locked away here. She'd always assumed there must be a rule against it, and maybe there is and this cinnamon-haired boy just doesn't care about the rules.

"I don't know if I should. Show them to you, I mean," she says, though, truthfully, the thought of leading the boy past the tall shelves and cabinets where the orbs were carefully arranged and cataloged by her father gives her a sort of thrill deep inside. "It might not be a good idea."

"Then I guess I'll just have a look for myself," he says, but when he reaches for the lantern, she grabs it first. She knows that he won't try to take it away from her, not after the cold he felt when their fingers brushed above the trapdoor. And she also knows that he won't enter the depths of the attic alone, without even the slim comfort of the oil lantern. She looks at the pocket watch again. Nineteen minutes, fourteen seconds since he knocked.

"I'll show you," she says, "but you don't touch anything, understand? And you don't go wandering off alone. There are other things up here besides the orbs, and you wouldn't want to see them. You wouldn't want them to see you."

The boy glances at the trapdoor, like maybe he's going to chicken out and head back down the ladder. Then he turns and looks into the wide darkness again, and slowly nods his head. "Okay," he says. "But I get to carry the lantern."

"No, you don't, either," she tells him and then, before the cinnamon-haired boy named Airdrie can say anything else, the brown girl gathers up the purple handkerchief and, holding the lantern out like an archangel's flaming sword, leads him past sagging bookshelves and a marble pedestal supporting a bust of Poseidon, and the attic of the yellow house on Benefit Street closes greedily around them.

I

Maryse opens her eyes and blinks up at the shifting fog and the dim, ruddy smudge trying to pass itself off as the sun. For a moment, she can't recall where she is, and none of it – not the fog nor the canvas hanging limp from the mizzenmast nor the salty, fishy stink of the sea – means anything at all to her. For that moment, which might only be the end of a dream, there's nothing more concrete than the pain nestled firmly behind her eyes, the pain that leads to nausea and dizziness as soon as she sits up. Then she remembers it all and would almost give her soul to forget again.

Gunfire, and the smell of blood and smoke and spent powder; the fear and anger glinting bright in the Captain's eyes before the mutineers shot him in the head and dumped his corpse over the side of the ship; the pastor smearing his clothes with pitch, setting himself on fire after renouncing Christ and calling on Heaven to drag the bark all the way down to Hell; all the unspeakable things that were done by and to the other passengers; the thirst, and heat, and hunger, and the sudden blow to the back of Maryse's head that should have killed her.

The Atlantic laps impotently at the thick hull of the *Cumbria*, water against wood to summon a listless, hungry sound like an old man without teeth, lips and gums and spittle smacking tirelessly to no effect. Maryse tries to recall how she got into the lifeboat, but that's something the pain seems to be keeping back, something it doesn't want her to know, at least not yet. There's a gaping hole hacked through the bottom of the boat, and a small axe lying nearby.

"Did I do that?" she asks and reaches for the axe, but pulls her hand back when she sees the crust of dried blood on the handle. She thinks about

trying to climb out of the lifeboat and onto the deck, searching the ship to see if anyone else is alive, but she might be better off not seeing whatever she would find, or whatever might find her, so she stares out at the sea instead.

It might almost be a silvered looking glass, a gently rippling mirror stretching away in every direction until it's lost in the mist. There's no way to be sure how long she lay unconscious in the little boat, but she does know that the *Cumbria* was becalmed fifteen days before the crew turned on Captain Malmstrom. So this might be the sixteenth day since the ship sailed into the mist, somewhere south and west of São Filipe and the Cape Verde archipelago. Or it might be the seventeenth. It hardly seems to matter now. This is as far as they're going, Maryse and the *Cumbria.* Her family is dead – her two sisters, her father and mother – all of them bound for Cape Town and a new life on a South African tobacco plantation. She's the very last. She'll be dead soon, too, surely, if there's any mercy.

But there is no *mercy,* she thinks. *No mercy at all. God has forsaken me and there is no mercy left. We have sailed completely off the world and into some damned and infernal region.* She lies back down in the lifeboat and stares up into the roiling mist. Her head hurts just a little less when she's lying down, and, besides, she doesn't want to see the ocean anymore.

She imagines a huge black raven perched on the davit above her head, watching her with eyes the color of molten gold, and Maryse reminds herself its only the fever, only the thirst, only her mind slipping away from sanity as her body gives up the ghost. Sometime later, as the sun smudge drags itself towards mid-day, the raven squawks once and dissolves in a shimmer of ebony rose petals. Maryse closes her eyes and tries hard to picture herself home again, her father's manor house in Kent, the copse where her mother once showed her a fairy ring, where she and her sisters played King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table and she was always Guinevere. The raven petals, which smell like licorice and coal dust, settle lightly about her face, and Maryse realizes for the first time that someone's removed her dress. There are stiff maroon spatters across the front of her muslin petticoat, but it's best not to think about that, either.

The ghost of the pastor sits at her feet, and there's another gold-eyed raven perched on his shoulder. The man's face has been scorched almost beyond recognition, but there's enough left of his face that he can smile for her. His broken teeth are shades of yellow and brown and ivory.

“What are you still hanging on for, missy?” he asks, but she doesn’t answer him. “You think there’s an angel coming to bear you up to Paradise? You think your strength will be rewarded?”

Maryse closes her eyes so that she won’t have to see him. “Isn’t this Hell?” she asks the ghost. “Didn’t you send us all to Hell?”

“No, I don’t know where this is,” he replies, and the raven laughs at him. There’s a crackling sound like paper burning, but Maryse keeps her eyes shut tight. “I can’t say for certain,” the parson mutters, “but I don’t believe it’s Hell. I think we’re lost, that’s all. I don’t think we’re even on the ocean anymore.”

“They’re all dead,” Maryse says, trying not to consider what he meant by *not on the ocean anymore*, and the crackling sound stops.

“Oh, don’t you worry your pretty little head over it, girl. You’re not far behind them.”

The raven flaps its wings and Maryse almost remembers what the sails sounded like, fluttering and swollen with wind, bearing them quickly across the sparkling sea.

If I had black wings, she thinks, *I could fly away from here. If I had wings, I could fly away home.*

“All in a hot and copper sky,” the raven squawks. “The bloody Sun, at noon, Right up above the mast did stand, No bigger than the Moon.”

“Please tell it to shut up,” she says, but the pastor doesn’t respond.

“Day after day, day after day,” the bird continues undaunted, “We stuck, nor breath nor motion; As idle as a painted ship, Upon a painted ocean.”

“But there wasn’t any albatross,” Maryse whispers, her mouth so dry it’s getting hard to speak, her lips cracked open and she tastes blood.

“Then it was some other sin,” the pastor tells her. “Let’s not start thinking ourselves innocent, child. There’s always plenty of sin to go around, whether there’s an albatross or not.”

Maryse swallows, her throat gone raw as the floor of a slaughterhouse, and she lies very, very still, listening to the bird reciting Coleridge. She wonders how long it will take for all the others to find their way back onto the *Cumbria*, and how long it will be, this time, before the crew mutinies, how long before the pastor’s suicide, and if she’ll make it into the lifeboat again.

II

The old man sits in an unsteady chair near the single window of his small apartment. On the folding aluminum card table in front of him is a revolver, a box of .45-caliber shells, the pearl-handled straight razor he's had since his days in Korea, a Bible that he stole from a motel room in Toledo years ago, and photographs stacked up like a deck of playing cards. Some of the photographs are black and white, creased and turning yellow at the edges, and some are faded Polaroids, and some are in color. The apartment smells like fried food and Raid bug spray and stale cigarettes. It's very, very quiet in the room with the unsteady chair and the folding aluminum card table, and there are no sounds leaking in from the world outside, because, as far as the old man can tell, there is no longer a world outside.

He cannot remember the last time he ate, or took a piss, or heard another human voice. He sleeps, sometimes, on the narrow, swaybacked bed shoved into one corner of the room, but he doesn't dream. He changes his clothes, trading one white T-shirt for another, one pair of boxers for the next.

The old man takes the topmost photograph from the stack, and glances at the window. There's a curtain, a dingy piece of cloth with make-believe sunflowers printed on it. When he prays, which is less frequently than he changes his underwear, he thanks God for that piece of cloth, grateful that there's something between him and the view, so he only has to look when he needs to be reminded.

The color photograph in his hand was taken on July 4, 1973. He knows this because the date is written on the back in his dead wife's swooping, left-leaning cursive. There are three children in the photograph, and a plastic wading pool. He slips the picture to the bottom of the stack and takes the next photo off the top. This one's in black and white, himself at age sixteen, smiling proudly and holding the rifle that his father gave him for his birthday, the first gun he ever used to kill anything. He glances at the curtain again, then places the photo at the bottom of the stack.

The third photograph shows him at forty-five, and his son at twenty-one, standing on a pier in Destin, Florida. His son is grinning and holding up the seven-pound Jack Crevalle he caught that day. There's no date on the back of this photograph. The old man lays it down next to the pearl-handled razor and shuts his eyes for a moment. When he opens them again, there's a cockroach crawling across the picture and he flicks it away from his right

index finger. It's so quiet in the apartment that he can hear the bug hit the floor on the other side of the room and then scramble away.

The old man tries to remember how long it's been since he baited the mousetraps beneath the sink. He thinks it was the same day that he last looked out the window. The traps never catch anything, but the bits of stale bread and breakfast cereal are always gone whenever he bothers to check them.

He pushes the unsteady chair away from the card table, its legs squeaking loudly as they slide across the linoleum floor, then stands up and looks again at the sunflower curtain hiding the window. Sometimes, he imagines that the curtain rustles slightly in a breeze that isn't there; sometimes, he thinks that he hears birds and traffic and human voices. So he always carries the Bible with him, whenever he goes to the window, whenever he can't stand not to look, the Bible and the revolver, because the sounds he imagines might be the demons that are waiting just beyond the limits of Purgatory. He knows that neither the Bible nor the Colt would stop them, if they ever found a way through, but the one makes him feel better and he could use the other to put a bullet in his brain before the demons reach him. He picks up the gun first, opens the cylinder to be sure that there are no empty chambers, then closes it again and reaches for the stolen King James Bible. He's read it six hundred and forty times, cover to cover, since the world went away and left him here.

The window is never more than five steps from the card table. The old man uses the barrel of the pistol to push the curtain to one side.

This time, he thinks, *the city will be there. This time the city will be there, and I'll be able to see all the way to Lake Michigan.*

And he also thinks, *Or the demons will have gotten through, and there won't be anything left but fire raining down from the sky and rivers of blood.*

The sunflower curtain slides easily along its metal rod, left to right, and in a moment more the old man can see that nothing out there has changed – no city, no view of Lake Michigan, no demons, no clotting rivers of blood. There's only the short space between the fourth-floor window and the place where the world ends. It's near enough he could touch it, if he leaned far out the window and used the broom handle. But he's never done that, and he doesn't think he ever will, because he doesn't want to know what would happen.

He can see himself reflected dimly in the smooth, faintly shiny surface, the face he hasn't shaved in days, the dark smudges beneath his eyes, his dirty hair, the black gun clutched in his right hand. He looks down, but the brick wall of the apartment building and the glassy surface both vanish in a soupy mist, no more than nine or ten feet below the sill. The third floor is lost somewhere in the mist. He looks up, and it's the same, the shifting grey mist and something white that might be the sun, or only a hole in a sky that isn't there anymore. It never gets dark, but he's pretty sure he wouldn't call this daylight, either.

He jumped once, not long after it began, but the old man woke up back in his bed with a splitting headache and something sticky that looked like tar, but smelled like vomit, staining his clothes. So he never jumped again.

Standing here, staring at himself staring back at himself, he curses and makes wild, hopeless promises involving the gun and the razor, promises he knows he's too much of a coward to ever keep. If he weren't, he suspects that it wouldn't make any difference anyway. He could stick the revolver in his mouth and blow the back of his fucking head off, or cut his throat from ear to ear, and he'd only wake up on the bed again, stinking of puke. Because old men who have been damned do not exit Purgatory with bullets and sharp steel blades.

He stands at the window until he can't bear the sight of his own reflection any longer, and then the old man pulls the sunflower curtain shut again and goes back to the card table and his stack of photographs.

"Holy shit," the changeling boy named Airdrie whispers. The brown girl is somewhere just behind him, but he's almost forgotten about her. They're standing near what might be the center of the attic of the yellow house, though he can't be certain about that. He followed her through the darkness and clutter for ten or fifteen minutes to get here, time enough to have walked all the way from Benefit Street to the old observatory over on Hope if he'd wanted to go for a stroll. Airdrie had just about decided that the attic went on forever, or they must be going in circles, when they finally came to a pool of silver-white moonlight shining in through a narrow pane set into the roof of the house. Rows of tall curio cabinets are arranged beneath the skylight, and the glass orbs they hold sparkle like iridescent gems. *Like pearls,* he thinks, remembering how Hester had lied to him about her name.

“There must be a *thousand* of them,” he says.

“Oh, considerably more than that,” the brown girl replies proudly.

“I heard some stories, but I never thought there’d be so many,” and he’s pretty sure that none of the others – the other Children of the Cuckoo and the *ghul* pups – are going to believe him.

“I shouldn’t have brought you here,” the brown girl says anxiously. “We should go back right now.”

“How *many* more than a thousand?” he asks.

“I don’t remember exactly, but we really ought – ”

“How do you know? Did you ever count them all?”

Airdrie takes a step towards the nearest cabinet, so tall that it reaches almost all the way to the sloped attic ceiling. It’s built from sturdy planks of some dark wood, wood shellacked the color of chocolate, and its shelves are crowded with dust and cobwebs and the glass orbs, hundreds of them. Most are no larger than a hen’s egg, but a few are as big around as rutabagas, and at least a couple are twice that size. He picks up one of the smaller ones and holds it to the moonlight. The orb is very cold to the touch, same as the brown girl’s hand, and its surface swirls with color, like the wavering, rainbow sheen of oil on water.

“*No!*” the brown girl shouts at him, and she plucks the orb from his fingers. “You can’t *touch* them. I’m not even supposed to touch them. Not *ever.*”

“I wasn’t gonna drop it,” he says sheepishly and backs away from the cabinet.

“That hardly matters, Airdrie,” she admonishes, carefully returning the orb to its spot on the shelf, the perfect circle of undusty wood where it must have sat for three quarters of a century. “Nobody touches them. That’s what my father said and so that’s the rule.”

Airdrie shrugs and stares down at the fingers of the hand that held the orb. They’re tingling faintly, almost painfully, and he thinks the cold might have burned him if she hadn’t taken it when she did.

“So this is why they sent him away?” he asks and blows on his fingertips to warm them.

“He said they didn’t understand,” the brown girl replies, turning to face him, turning her back on the tall cabinet.

“That’s not what I asked you,” Airdrie says. “I asked you if this is why they sent him away.”

“I *know* what you asked me. I have ears.”

“Then why don’t you just answer my question?”

“You never had a father, did you?” she asks instead. “I mean, not one you can remember. The ghouls stole you away from your mother and father when you were only a little baby, so you don’t understand.”

“Understand what? I understand it’s rude not to answer a question.”

“But not that there are some questions that it’s rude to ask in the first place. You’re just the same as the hounds that raised you.”

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

“Never you mind. But I shouldn’t have brought you here and now you have to leave.”

Airdrie’s heard stories that the brown girl’s insane, that living alone in the attic and never getting any older has driven her crazy, and he’s beginning to believe them, regardless of what Miss Josephine and Madam Terpsichore have told him to the contrary. Standing there, looking into her piercing velvet-brown eyes, he thinks that maybe she’s gone mad as a March hare in May and it’s supposed to be some sort of secret.

“Was your momma really an Indian?” he asks her. “That’s what I’ve always heard.”

“I don’t remember her,” the brown girl replies and shakes her head.

“See there? You’re doing it again. That’s not an answer. I didn’t ask whether or not you remembered her.”

“*Yes*,” the brown girl snaps, and she turns away from him again. “My mother was an Indian. She was a Montauk woman that my father brought to Providence from Long Island. I want you to leave.”

Airdrie realizes that his fingers have stopped tingling and he steps around Hester for another look at the orbs.

“Don’t worry,” he tells her. “I’m not going to touch any of them. I just want to see, that’s all. Did your father ever say that looking was against the rules?”

“No. He never said that. Although I know I shouldn’t have brought you up here.”

“But you already did, so now you may as well let me see what all the fuss is about.” Then Airdrie leans close to one of the larger orbs; the glass is very dusty, but he can still make out the oily colors writhing across its surface. There are two symbols that appear to have been scratched deeply into the orb with something sharp – an Ω, which he remembers from his

lessons, and something that looks sort of like an open eye at the center of two interlocking triangles.

"What do those mean?" he asks her, pointing at the symbols, but the brown girl doesn't answer.

"Is it magic?"

"It's *all* magic," she sighs impatiently. "You've seen enough, haven't you? Won't they start wondering where you've gone?"

"They might," he says, "but Miss Josephine said I could talk to you for a little while, if I wanted to."

"I bet she didn't say you could go wandering off into the attic, though."

Airdrie blows some of the dust off the orb, disturbing a fat ginger-colored spider that he hadn't noticed, and it scurries away into the shadows.

"Don't *do* that," the brown girl says, and she puts a strong hand on his right shoulder. "I told you – "

"I didn't touch. I just blew on it, that's all."

"Don't touch it *or* blow on it."

Airdrie ignores her, keeping his eyes on the orb. He thinks that maybe the iridescence is a bit dimmer than before he blew the dust away, and now there seems to be something inside.

"Did I do that?" he asks, and the brown girl mumbles angrily beneath her breath. Airdrie realizes that the something inside the orb is water, the flat calm surface of a sea, and that there's a tiny ship floating on it. He counts the masts, four from stem to stern, and then the surface of the orb grows milky, hiding the ship from view, and suddenly the iridescent motley returns brighter than before.

"That's *all*?" he laughs, glancing at the brown girl. "A ship in a bottle? Your father built ships – "

"It's not a bottle," she says, watching the orb instead of him.

"Well, it's almost the same damn thing, ain't it? I can't believe they sent your father away to Weir and locked you up in here because he was building little ships inside glass balls."

"He didn't build anything," the brown girl says very softly. "He only found things."

III

Asrith Wagoti checks the settings on her glove, sees that there's still enough pressure in the wrist sac to get off six or seven quick shots, and then she stares up from the bottom of the deep crevasse at the colorless, roiling sky. The heavy mist is lingering just above the glacier, but at least it hasn't settled into the fissures yet. She flares her nostrils and sniffs at the freezing air, perks her sensitive ears, searching for even the faintest trace of the Olgalnic stalkers or their mechanical drones. They were so damn close, almost right on top of her when she finally blew her last smoker and lost the lot of them in the tunnels, the winding caverns of blue ice that opened, finally, into this crevasse. When she's satisfied that she's alone, Asrith crouches in the snow, wrapping herself in the rustling folds of her cloak, hoping there will be time enough to catch her breath before they figure out which way she went.

A few snowflakes spiral down from above and settle on her broad shoulders and exposed forearms, the white flecks bright against her hairless, indigo skin.

She's lost track of how many times she's found herself hiding in this very same crevasse, or how long the stalkers have been pursuing her through the bowels of the glacier flowing down from the barren, obsidian flanks of the Szurshee Mountains. And yet there's never any evidence that she's come this way before. Sometimes, Asrith tries to remember how it must have begun, the soldiers of the Olgaln catching up with her in the blizzard, catching her off her guard, and there was no way she'd ever have made it across the wide valley to the tarn on the other side, the place where she was supposed to meet the void pilot who'd been paid to get her offworld.

They're coming, says the sleeper spiked into the base of her hindbrain. *You can't stop here. They're coming. They'll find me.*

"Just shut the fuck up and let me do this," she growls and rubs at the rough nubbin of horn between her eyebrows. Her whole head throbs whenever the sleeper starts talking, and Asrith curses herself for having accepted such a heavy package. She's always made it a policy to stick strictly to the criminal lightweights – quick thieves, political dissidents, memory traitors, rogue clones – certainly no one that the Olgaln wants badly enough that they'd waste time chasing her halfway to hell and back.

"Listen to me, Wagoti, this one's worth a fortune," Skeller said, after she'd told him no three times and then threatened to jump agents if he asked

again. “It’s risky, you bet, but you’re one of the best, and if you get this load across you’ll never have to carry for anyone again.”

She laughed and told him to go fuck himself with the hot end of his spike thread, then finished her drink and left the *sha’lír* bar. But two days later, when she’d sobered up and there was only her hangover and the prospect of growing old with a head full of echoes to finally drive her insane, she tabbed him and took the package.

Can’t you smell them? the sleeper whines from the back of her skull. *Can’t you hear them?*

“I can’t hear anything but *you,*” she whispers and flexes her left hand, arming the glove. The sleeper’s panic is starting to bleed over into her own consciousness, and if she has to use one of the barrier plugs to maintain the spike’s integrity, she’ll be too sick to walk, much less elude a stalker retrieval.

Overhead, the mist drifts endlessly by, rolling, coiling, rearranging itself into the silver ghosts of her worst nightmares.

They told me you could do this. I trusted you with my soul.

Asrith takes a deep breath, coughs out steam, and slowly gets to her feet again. She glances back at the spot where the tunnel empties into the crevasse, a ragged, vertical tear in the ice, a cavity black as a night without stars or moons, and prays to all her mother’s gods that they’ve lost her trail.

How long have we been running? the sleeper asks. *We’ve been running forever, haven’t we?*

“*I’ve* been running, *nas’meer.* You’re just along for the fucking ride.”

We have *been running forever,* the sleeper replies hopelessly. *Forever and ever and ever. There was never a time before, never anything but the Olgaln hunting us and us running.*

“You’re the biggest idiot I’ve ever had stuck inside my head, you know that?”

You know it’s true, Asrith. You just don’t want to believe it.

The first stalker scrambles out of the tunnel and into the crevasse, all quills and sinew and thannuled grafts, and it sees her only a few seconds after she sees it. She shoots first, a sizzling blast of light as blue as the heart of the glacier but hot as the sun, and hits the stalker in the soft depression just beneath the keel of its sternum. It screams in pain and rage and surprise and crumples lifelessly to the ground. But the others are coming right

behind it, and Asrith knows that there's no way she's going to get that lucky twice in a row.

You would remember this, the sleeper mutters behind her eyes, *if you were less of a coward. You'd know how many times we've died.*

Asrith makes a fist, and the sac implanted in her wrist pumps another round into the glove. "You better fucking hope I don't live through your extraction," she snarls at the sleeper and begins retreating down the crevasse as the second and third stalkers emerge from the tunnel. They're much bigger than the first, two great red corporals hung with mirrored optic banks and revolving sensory relays, and they bristle and howl and raise their weapons.

It's a dead end, Asrith Wagoti. There's nowhere left to run. We have to die again before we can run any farther.

"You don't know that. There might be another tunnel – "

Then the stalkers start shooting, waves of fire and thunder trapped between the high walls of the crevasse, concussions to bring down razor sheets of ice, and Asrith forgets about fighting back and runs for whatever's left of her life. She squeezes her left thumb until the brittle plastic capsule beneath her skin breaks open, activating the grid of shield cells wedged in between her third and fourth cervical vertebrae. But the shield was only designed to take small-arms fire and it loops and crashes after the first impact.

Skeller said you were the best, the sleeper whispers from its crackling, electrostatic nest. *I trusted you with my soul.*

Asrith feels the shield go down, the sudden, dizzying pain that means there's nothing at all between her and the stalkers' lances, and she dives for cover behind a glittering slab of ice and snow that's fallen from somewhere above.

She almost makes it.

Again, and again, and again…

IV

The wounded Confederate soldier, Private John Bailey, born in Albany, Georgia, and lately of the 2nd Georgia Calvary, squats in a thick tangle of blackberry briars and honeysuckle. He shivers and clutches the stock of his Springfield, his head filled to bursting with the smothering silence of the cold November night. Sometimes he prays for forgiveness

and an end to his pain, though he doesn't think the Lord listens to deserters and cowards, so he doesn't expect that either of his prayers will be granted. Sometimes he cries like a lost child, alone in the wild, war-torn Tennessee night. Sometimes he tries to remember all the names of every single Confederate and Yankee officer he's ever heard, and then he curses them to the hottest pit of Hell, one by one by one. There's a musket ball lodged deep in his left leg, somewhere just above the knee, and the ground around him is sticky with blood. He imagines the sun rising on frost the color of the red roses in his grandmother's garden.

Beyond the underbrush is the thickest fog John Bailey's ever seen, and it creeps through and over the Knox County woods like a hungry battalion of phantoms. The whole world overrun by ghosts, the world slaughtered and left wandering without purpose or hope, only useless, fading memories of what's been lost.

That's the fairy story that he keeps telling himself, because it's surely less terrible than the truth. John Bailey rubs at his eyes and stares up through the black tangle of brambles and vines, wishing he could at least see the moon, the same silver crescent that other men, men who have not somehow tumbled off the face of the earth, might look up this night and also see. But the mist hides both the moon and stars, and whatever the eyes of living men might see is hidden from him.

"I am not a dead man," he whispers. The mist doesn't answer him, one way or the other; it is an army of phantoms without tongues. "This is all a goddamned dream, or a fever. If I can live until the morning, someone will find me, *someone – "*

But then he stops talking and quickly covers his mouth with his right hand. His voice is much too loud, and the mist seems to play tricks with it, setting it against him.

There will never be another morning, he thinks, *not in this damned place,* and his thoughts seem almost as loud as his voice.

From the darkness behind him, there's a very small, rustling sort of sound, and John Bailey rolls over and stares into the night and the mist, straining his eyes, his heart hammering in time to the ache in his left leg.

All nights have mornings at the other end of them.

"Who's out there!" he shouts. "You show yourself!"

All nights have mornings.

There’s neither powder nor ball left for the Springfield, and he somehow lost the ramrod when he made the dash for the woods, when he abandoned his regiment to their fates out on the Concord Road, but the rifle feels safe and solid in his hands. Wood and steel against every insubstantial fear, and he sets the stock against his cheek and sights down the long barrel, cocks the empty weapon and waits for whatever’s making the sound to show itself.

After a moment or two, the rustling ceases, and he lies there, face down in the wet leaves, too weak to roll over again.

“Oh, god,” he whimpers, muttering into the stink of soil and decay and grub worms, the sweet, fermenting smells of the forest floor – a fetor that is both life and death – slipping up his nostrils as effortlessly as the mist moves between the trees. “I ain’t gonna die like this. I ain’t gonna die in the dirt with my own bullet in my leg.”

The sound comes again, closer than before, but this time he ignores it. This time he keeps his head down, trying to remember how long the night has lasted, if perhaps he dozed off at some point, if he’s dozed more than once and that’s why he’s so completely disoriented. He clearly remembers the twilight, scrambling down a steep ravine and almost falling into the narrow creek bed below. Afterwards, after he splashed across the creek and headed deeper into the woods south of Campbell’s Station, everything starts to blur together and he can’t be certain of the order of things.“The wall,” John Bailey says, “*that’s* what came first,” even though he knows he isn’t at all sure that it did. He might have hidden in the thicket first, then wandered out later on and found the glass wall, then come back here. It might have happened that way round, instead. He shuts his eyes tightly and listens to the rustling in the leaves.

Nothing out there but a possum, he thinks, *a possum or a coon or an old polecat,* but he doesn’t know that either. He fired at the wall twice; both shots ricocheted and the second hit him in the leg. But the Springfield left not so much as a scratch in the milky glass, if it truly was glass, that smooth, seamless barrier rising from the ground and stretching skyward until it was finally lost in the mist. He’d tried to find a way around it first, before he’d started shooting at the thing, and had walked at least a mile in either direction, east and west, but the wall went on and on, forever, as far as he could tell.

The rustling finally stops and John Bailey opens his eyes. There's a rabbit watching him from only five or six feet away. His stomach rumbles and he imagines it dead and dressed and roasting over a fire.

"Don't worry, rabbit," he whispers. "I haven't got anything much left to kill you with." Then he laughs, and the rabbit blinks once and bolts for cover, and he's alone again. And the mist, like the tattered souls of all the men he's seen fall in battle, from Perryville to Murfreesboro to Chickamauga, drifts past his eyes, and soon he's asleep.

In the attic of the yellow house on Benefit Street, the brown girl stands near the center of the ring of tall curio cabinets, watching nervously as the boy named Airdrie examines their contents. She looks at her father's pocket watch and sees that it's just after nine o'clock, that more than an hour and a half has passed since he knocked on the underside of the trapdoor. Nobody's ever stayed this long before, and she doesn't understand why someone hasn't come to claim Airdrie. Maybe they have, she thinks, but they've gotten lost in the attic. It's very easy to do.

The boy leans close to one of the orbs and blows the dust off it, even though she's asked him over and over not to do that. "There's a forest in this one, too," he says. "And a little man with a rifle."

"Do you know what time it is?" the brown girl asks him.

"No," he replies, "but I'd have thought you'd be happy to have someone to talk to. Isn't that what you wanted? You said we could talk and tell each other stories – "

"You don't want to talk to me. You just want to gawk at my father's work, so you can tell people what you've seen up here, so you can impress them."

"What makes you think anyone cares?"

"I'm still up here, aren't I?"

The boy moves on to the next cabinet, a different orb, and doesn't bother to answer her.

"I swear, if you blow on another one, I'm gonna kick you," she says, and he stops and glances over his shoulder at her.

"No, you won't."

"Well, then, do it and let's see."

Airdrie blows on one of the bigger orbs, raising a tiny dust storm, and the brown girl sighs and stares down at the floor between the scuffed toes of

her shoes. “I’m starting to think the ghouls did your mother and father a favor, stealing you away,” she says.

“I knew you wouldn’t kick me,” he says, then coughs from all the dust getting up his nose and down his throat.

The brown girl walks over to where he’s standing by the cabinet and kicks Airdrie in the left ankle as hard as she can. He yelps, calls her something unkind in the coarse, barking tongue of the ghouls, and then sits down and rubs at his ankle.

“Sorry. I don’t speak *Ghul*,” she tells him. “So, if you want to insult me, I’m afraid you’ll just have to do it in English or French or – ”

“You broke my damn ankle!”

“They’re not toys, Airdrie. They’re not here for you to play with, just because you’ve never seen anything like them before. They’re very, very fragile.”

“Didn’t you hear what I said? You *broke my ankle,”* and the brown girl thinks the boy’s starting to sound like someone who’s about to cry.

“That’s not likely,” she replies, but kneels down beside him and rolls up his pant leg for a look at Airdrie’s ankle. He doesn’t try to stop her.

“It’s no damn wonder they keep you locked away up here,” he says. “That’s just what you deserve.”

“It’s not broken,” the brown girl says and rolls his pant leg down again. “It’s just bruised, that’s all.”

“How do *you* know? You *don’t* know, do you? It’s broken, and now I’ll probably have to crawl all the way out of this place.”

The brown girl frowns and stares him in the eyes. “Well, it’s an awfully, *awfully* long way to have to crawl, but, if you like, I’ll carry the lantern for you. And if any of the rats come along – ”

“I was wrong,” Airdrie snarls, but he looks away, glares at his injured ankle instead of at her. “Being locked up in here’s too good for someone as mean as you. Someone mean as you, they ought to stick *you* in one of those balls.”

“Maybe that’s exactly what they did,” she says and then gets to her feet again. “Now, give me your hand and I’ll help you back to the trapdoor. Believe me, you don’t want to go crawling around on these floors.”

The boy sniffs and wipes his nose. “That’s not true,” he says. “That’s not what they did to you. They locked you in the attic, that’s all.”

“Give me your hand, Airdrie,” the brown girl says, and he looks up at her. There’s fear in his green eyes now, like flecks of mica and gold, and the barest hint of something she thinks might be remorse. “You’ve been up here a long time. It’s not good for you.”

“I didn’t mean any harm,” he says and sniffs again.

“I know that. You just didn’t know any better. Now, give me your hand.”

This time the boy with hair the color of cinnamon does as he’s told, and she hauls him to his feet.

“Can you stand on it?” she asks. “Can you walk?”

“Yeah, I think so,” he says, but winces when he puts his weight on the foot.

“I’ll go very slowly,” the brown girl says, and she leads him away from the skylight and the orbs and the ring of tall curio cabinets. She carries the oil lantern for him, shining the way back through the gloom and clutter, and he follows a few steps behind, limping and mumbling things to himself that she doesn’t try to overhear. When they finally reach the trapdoor, he doesn’t have as much trouble with the ladder as she’d have thought.

“If they ever ask me to do this again,” he tells her, when he’s past the loose rung and already halfway to the landing below, “I’ll tell them no way. I’ll tell them to find somebody else.”

“That’s probably for the best,” she calls down after him, and in a few moments more, Airdrie pulls the attic door shut again. “By the time they get around to sending someone else,” she says, speaking softly because she knows that he won’t hear, “you’ll be a grown man, with better things to do than bring sweets and toys to little girls locked away in attics. By then, you probably won’t even remember me anymore.”

Then the brown girl sits down next to the milking stool and the mostly purple paisley handkerchief, and she takes her father’s watch from the pocket of her dress. All three of the hands have stopped moving now, frozen at nine twenty-one and seven seconds, the moment when Airdrie pulled the trapdoor closed. *I’m exactly that much older,* she thinks, though she honestly doesn’t *feel* any older. The brown girl, whose name is Hester, but who has always thought of herself as Pearl, sets the watch on the floor, then folds the handkerchief open again and breaks a small piece off one of the red and white candy canes. It’s spicy and makes her tongue a little bit

numb, and she sits, and waits, and fashions a new game for herself from all the noises that the ancient yellow house makes in its long and fitful sleep.

The Daughter of the Four of Pentacles

She led me into *Daughter of Hounds*, did the brown girl in the attic, Pearl and all her missing father’s imprisoned days. Written in an old schoolhouse in Atlanta, while my mind walked the streets of Providence. Hell fits in the palm of your hand.

The Dry Salvages

~ A Short Novel ~

Lying awake, calculating the future,
Trying to unweave, unwind, unravel
And piece together the past and the future,
Between midnight and dawn, when the past is all deception,
The future futureless, before the morning watch
When time stops and time is never ending…

T. S. Eliot, “The Dry Salvages” (1941)

I.

The First Pen

The *Montelius* was still more than a week out of port, her golden foil sails skimming the darkness at the edge of the Gliese system, when the med droids decided it was time to start waking us up. That sort of thing used to annoy Joakim so much he'd actually stop talking to me for hours, that I would speak of the agency droids as sentient creatures instead of programmed machines, that I would say something like, "The med droids *decided*" this or that, as though I somehow knew better than the ANSA AI larks hidden away in their sterile New Kobe and Atlanta and Johannesburg cloisters. The droids assigned to the *Montelius* were an eccentric, mismatched lot – a few clunky old 712s and SJ4s rubbing shoulders with a handful of the newer Korean synthfolk. They always gave Joakim the twitch, the synths, with their more-human-than-human faces, their lilting, gentle voices, and the way they moved, fluid as water flowing across glass. A poet – I can't remember which one – called them "angels of plastic and light." Regardless, they were anything but robots, and I, at least, was glad for their company.

I opened my dry, gummy eyes, more than seventeen Earth years after I'd shut them – though not quite seven and a half years had passed on the *Montelius* – and stared up, at, and through the nonreflective dome of my stasis cell. The agency had spent years perfecting a transparent polymer that would eliminate as much reflection as possible, to help offset the cognitive dissonance that usually comes with knowing so much time has passed, out *there*, while, snug inside your cocoon, you've aged hardly at all. And, of course, no one ever looks particularly apple after years of stasis. The life-support systems and the medbots are there to keep you alive and healthy, not pretty. So, they save the mirrors for later, because out on the lanes, it's all about morale. There were signs posted in every corridor on the *Montelius*: "Safety first," they would solemnly, cheerfully intone whenever you approached, "and don't forget – a *happy* traveler is a *safe* traveler." After the incident with the *Aegis*, back in 2123, ANSA finally started taking psychometrics a lot more seriously. Ten dead, half the droids gutted beyond repair, and an Explorer-class fleet-tube MIA for half a decade, you better

fucking believe it got the attention of the ekzecs and expenditure snipes. The *Aegis* was the last human crew to make the trip from one star to another awake.

"Spook stories for travelers," Joakim once said dismissively when the subject of the *Aegis* came up during some dinner or breakfast or another, before Piros, when we were both still stationed on Europa. "Bogeymen for a century without bogeymen. Don't you believe half of what you hear about that tub. On the lanes, you don't make mistakes, and if you *do*, kiss your ass farewell. There's no need to spread ghost stories."

But I'd already scanned the ANSA report on the *Aegis* for myself, both the official draft and an uncensored darkslip I found stashed in some encryption temple nook of the hypernet. Some seriously trag-ugly shit spelled out in that doc, whether Joakim wanted to acknowledge it or not. For example, the first mate, Dr. Jaeng Li Chieu, a Chinese national and two-time Nobel-winning physicist. They found her in the medbay, fully conscious, her body held in quarter-stasis for two years, exquisitely vivisected by three of the 712s. She'd given all the orders to the droids. She'd even made the notes, as long as she had fingers left to operate the keyboard.

I suppose it makes some kind of sense that I can't avoid these morbid thoughts of the *Aegis* – here, now – as I finally begin to set down the events of that long-ago December, my brief and terrible time in the dim red light of an alien star, stranded at the ass-end of my coma, almost five parsecs from the familiar white eye of Sol. And old women can let their thoughts wander where they wish, and they can say what they think, how they wish to say it, especially when they know that it's unlikely that anyone will believe a word of what's being said.

I opened my eyes and the med droid assigned to my cell smiled at me when she saw I was awake. Her violet eyes twinkled artificially in the too-bright glare of the stasis chamber. Back then, with AI hysteria the brayest and most acceptable of racisms, synthfolk were all manufactured with those vivid, unnatural eyes – violet for "females" and crimson for "males." Sometimes, I miss those pretty, hard-candy eyes. For a few years, teenagers in America and Japan (and other places, I'm sure, but that's what I remember) wore violet and crimson contacts, until they found some other way of upsetting the cops and their parents and the social engineers.

I blinked back the glare from the long banks of lights built into the ceiling, trying hard to force the droid and her violet irises into focus, trying to make sense of the cell's internal display screen embedded at the top of the ultra-transparent plastic dome. Nanites nestled in my lacrimal ducts had begun secreting saline the moment I awoke, but my eyes itched and stung, and the screen refused to resolve into anything more than a blur of green and red and white, like some Christmas spectre hovering only a few inches from my face. Fake tears streamed down my cheeks, and the blurry android smiled and nodded her head for me.

Beneath my body and the contoured layers of somaform bedding, unseen machineries hummed and clicked, hydraulics whining suddenly, reluctantly to life as the atmospheric and barometric regulators cycled through their release protocols. I shut my eyes again, giving up on clarity, giving up for now, and listened to the grating hiss of seventy-four old-fashioned titanium-steel-resin bolts drawn simultaneously from their strike plates. The pressure seal popped the cell's hood, and the placental warmth was washed away by the chill of the stasis chamber.

"Good morning, Dr. Cather," the droid said and slipped a damp biofeed bracelet snugly around my left wrist.

"Is it?" I croaked, my mouth so dry I was beginning to wonder if I'd somehow gotten a bad batch of nanites.

"Is it *what*, Dr. Cather?" she asked patiently, busy connecting filaments from the bracelet to an oval console in her bare chest.

"Is it really morning?"

"6:03 A.M. Eastern Standard," she replied. "In Miami, the sun will be rising soon."

"Have you ever been to Miami?" I asked, trying to work up enough spit to swallow.

"No. I've never been to Earth, doctor. I need you to be still and stop talking while we check out your metabolic and neuro stats."

"Are the others okay?"

"Quiet, please, Dr. Cather," and then the violet-eyed droid counted aloud to fifty, and the bracelet, one of those soft, pulsing abominations spliced together from sea cucumbers and various species of marine algae, slipped fiber-optic spines a few millimeters beneath my skin and immediately began to relay my vitals to the computer buried in the droid's

naked chest. I knew that it was also administering a mild tranquilizer produced in the walls of its cloaca.

“I hate those things,” I said and nodded at the bracelet, beginning to relax as the initial shock of waking dissolved under the influence of the drug. “They’re fucking disgusting.”

“Yes, they are,” she said and shone a penlight into my eyes, the left, then the right, then the left again. “You can talk now, Dr. Cather.”

I nodded and took a deep breath, filling my lungs with the sterile medbay air. There was no scent or taste in that antiseptic air, at least nothing I wanted to taste or smell after a ninety-month sleep. I licked at my lips and wondered how long it would be until I could have a cup of coffee and a cigarette.

“The others are fine,” the droid replied and removed the biofeed bracelet. Its bristling ventral spines left behind a couple dozen tiny droplets of blood on my pale skin, which she quickly swabbed away. “All their readouts are looking good, but you’re the first to awaken.”

“The early bird gets the worm.”

“What?” she asked and made that face the synthfolk make when they know they ought to understand something, but don’t.

“Thank you,” I told her. “That’s good to hear,” and then I tried to enjoy the effects of the sea cucumber-algae thing’s sedative while I waited for the examination to end.

A couple of hours later, when the med droids were done with me and I’d stumbled, groggy and weak, to my quarters and dressed in the simplest things I could find – a white robe and a pair of boxers, the one-hundred-percent natural fleece slippers and toboggan that my brother gave me when ANSA natsci finally cleared me for the exobio corps – I took one of the mini-lifts up and over to the larboard crew lounge. I knew that I’d be the first, that I’d have the little compartment to myself for at least a few minutes before the others began trickling in. A red and grey 712 served me a steaming cup of extremely weak coffee (one part coffee to three parts distilled water) and two pro-carb biscuits. I thanked it, and the old bot bleeped at me politely. My throat ached from the feeding tubes, but the coffee felt good going down, and I even managed to nibble at one of the flat, vaguely citrus-flavored biscuits. I knew it would be days before my body was again ready for decent food, and I tried not to think about the

procession of nutra pills and powdered supplements and intravenous fluids that lay between me and a warm tube of soyachick paste.

"You're here because this is what you wanted," I told myself, shivering and pulling the robe more tightly about me. "This is what you wanted more than anything in the world, remember?"

Yeah, I thought. *You just keep right on telling yourself that,* recalling my face in the tiny mirror above the dry sink in my quarters. My face, looking like a plague victim or someone who'd punched a lethal rad dose, my skin gaunt and grey and slack. Maybe I'd aged less than eight years since we made speed, and here I was only thirty, but I could have passed for a very sickly forty-five, *daijoubu desu*.

I set my empty mug and the uneaten biscuits down on the low table in front of me and reached for the keypad built into the armrest of my chair. In a moment, the wall of the *Montelius* shimmered and then seemed to melt away, and I was staring instead at blackness dappled with unfamiliar, disorienting constellations. And there was Gliese 876, still so very far away, but close enough to dominate the screen, a faint, red-dwarf beacon calling out across time and the endless night. We'd answered another, very different sort of beacon, of course, but at that moment, it seemed this star was the only voice in the heavens.

And it hit me then, the homesickness that the skullrooters had spent so much time warning us about back in psyprep. It hit me like nausea and migraines and a ton of rocks tumbling down to bury me forever, and I thought that was surely the most lost, the loneliest that anyone could ever feel. The tears came in an instant, but at least they were my tears, not the unreliable secretions of lacrimal nanites. I switched off the visuals, and the wall was only a wall again, then sat with my face cradled in my hands, sobbing and hating myself for being weak.

It's nothing you didn't know *was coming.*

It's nothing at all. Nothing but time, and distance.

And then I heard footsteps in the corridor, and the lounge doors slid not-quite-silently open behind me.

"They say that's healthy," Joakim said, and I quickly wiped at my eyes and nose, as if he hadn't already seen, as if I could ever hide anything from him. "It's nothing to be ashamed of, Audrey. Hell, I cried the whole time the mechs were picking and prodding at me, and that was without the benefit of visuals."

I glanced at him over my shoulder, Joakim dressed in nothing the least bit personal, just a regulation powder-blue ANSA jumpsuit. And never mind what I should have expected, what I *knew* I'd see. I wasn't ready to see anything but the healthy, sun-browned face of the man who'd gone to sleep in the stasis cell next to mine. In coma, Joakim had lost thirty pounds, easy, and I'd never seen him with a beard. He looked like an old man.

"Murdin's on the way up," he said, and then kissed me lightly on top of the head before taking the seat next to mine. "She was awake before me, but she wanted to plug up with navigation."

"We're exactly smack-center where we're supposed to be," I said and wiped my runny nose on the back of my left hand again. "All you have to do is drag down the screen to see."

"Yeah, I know that, and you know that, and every droid on the *Monty* knows that, but Murdin – "

" – always has to see for herself."

Joakim nodded and ran his fingers through his thinning hair, only a few hints of auburn left among the strands of grey and white. The 712 returned from its cubby and gave him his own cup of coffee and his own biscuits. He didn't say thank you, but the mech bleeped politely, anyway.

"The droid that ran my stats claims we're about nine days from port," he said and ate one of the biscuits in a single bite, then sipped at his coffee.

"Careful," I said, "or you'll only puke it right back up again."

"Maybe it would taste better the second time around."

"Maybe," I muttered absently and shook my head, staring at the blank wall where the screen had been, the solid, unrevealing hull of the tube to hide the void beyond, to hide the red siren at the heart of this system. "We're already decelerating?" I asked.

"Yeah. We've probably been decelerating for a couple of weeks now," he replied and then ate his other biscuit. "Murdin will know more after she chats with Magellan."

"They should have waited a few more days."

"Too much work to do," Joakim said, finishing his coffee. "We gotta take these meatsacks back up to spec," and he poked himself in the belly.

"I need a cigarette," I said.

"No, you don't. You want a cigarette."

"I want to go home."

“No, you don’t want that, either. You want to see whatever the hell they’ve hauled us all the way out here to see, same as me. It’s just taking you a little longer to get your bearings, that’s all.”

“I’ve got my fucking bearings,” I replied, sounding more bitter than I’d meant to, but beginning to wish Joakim had gone to the cockpit with Murdin.

He set his cup down on the table next to mine, then ran his fingertips across the keypad on his own chair, but the wall of the ship remained a wall. He cursed and tried again, and again the controls failed to respond. “I think this chair’s bloody clapped,” he said and rubbed at his beard.

“There’s nothing out there you want to see,” I told him, grateful to be spared the sight of the red dwarf again. I thought about going back to my quarters to wait for my next turn in medbay, but couldn’t imagine what I’d do once I got there.

“You’ll feel better in a few hours,” he said. “It’s just lag. You know that. This time tomorrow – ”

“ – there will only be eight days left to port.”

“Jesus, Audrey,” and he slumped back in his chair and frowned and stared at me with those intense blue eyes, lazulite and winter skies, eyes that didn’t seem a day older than the night we’d left Ganymede-Kobayashi Station. “You’re one of the first extrasolar exopaleontologists. In a few days, you’re going to see fossils of animals that evolved and became extinct on the moon of a planet revolving around an alien sun. You’re not just going to see them, you’re going to *hold* them in your hands.”

“There was so much work left to do on Europa,” I said.

“And there are plenty of competent people there to do it. You’ve *earned* this.”

“Have I?” I asked him. “Have I earned this?” But then the lounge doors slid open again, and Murdin stepped into the room, and I went back to sipping my coffee.

I should pause to wonder how much of what I’m writing here is pure fiction. After all, I have only my faded memories, more than fifty years old at this point, to draw upon. My duty log and personal journal, along with all my files, field and lab notes, were retained by the agency immediately after Piros, before our long sleep back to Jupiter. Same with Joakim and Umachandra Murdin and Peter Connor, everything the four of us had

recorded during those eight months. Connor's neural implants were wiped raw of everything pertaining in any way to the expedition. Joakim always said the post-wipe amnesia was as much to blame for Connor's eventual suicide as the events themselves. He'd show me studies on memory trauma and cerebral degradation, and always I'd listen, because he was scared and angry, and I didn't know what else to do. I have no idea whether or not he was right about ANSA's role in Connor's death, though I was grateful that I'd never been one for cybernetic upgrades and augmentation.

In my room in Paris, a third-floor flat in an overcrowded 19th-Century hovel located at the north end of what's left of the Rue Linné, I sit at my desk and write these things on yellowed, antique paper with a temperamental ballpoint pen. It took me a month to find three reconditioned ballpoint pens, and then the paper cost me a week's pay. The public lectures I give three times a month at the Jardin des Plantes never mention what we saw (or didn't see) on Piros. I talk about Europan paleontology and marine diversity, hydrothermal vents or the extinction of the dinosaurs, or the month I spent on Titan. I stick to my notes, which have all been approved by the natsci PTB. I stick to my notes and wonder what would happen if I ever did otherwise.

The ink from this pen is almost the same shade of blue as the blood beneath the thin skin of my wrists. The paper is the color of my teeth.

Anyway, I was saying, this is only what I can piece together, relying on an old woman's wasted memories. I know that I'm making a lot of it up to fill in the empty spaces. I don't remember what the violet-eyed droid said to me that morning in medbay, for instance, or much of what Joakim said later on, as we sat together in the lounge. So, yes, it *is* a fiction, but I know that there are truths in here.

Or I am only a madwoman raving to herself, and no harm's done.

I'm not sure that it matters any longer, whichever is the case. The sun is setting, and it's time to feed the cats. I do that myself, because the cats hate bots.

Umachandra Murdin's parents had both been involved in the posthumanist secession back in the late twenties, and spent years capping retroviral genshots to dilute their chromosomes with whatever exotics they could scrounge on the ph black market. And when, inevitably, they finally started to get sick, when their bodies began to manifest the tumors, the

lesions, the rare blood and autoimmune diseases that made the secession so extremely short-lived, Umachandra's mother dutifully got pregnant, as advised by the writings of the zoophilic Berkeley bioengineer who'd started the whole mess. Her husband died before the child was born, the child who would find herself among the "lucky" twenty or thirty percent of ph babies that survived to adulthood. Devakali Murdin died of pneumonia and kidney failure only a few days after giving birth.

The first time I met Umachandra, we were both natsci recruits at the agency's North American training facility just outside Houston. Almost twenty years had passed since the first tube had reached the Gliese system, and those few higher-ups who were privy to the contents of the communications racing back towards Earth from the *Gilgamesh* were tripping over themselves putting together the next outward bound team, and the next after that, and so on.

I was stuck in one of those endless pre-briefings we all endured before the PTB finally started rationing the details regarding a large red moon that the *Gilgamesh* team had named Piros. It was mid-July in Wharton County, Texas, and the drywall-and-linoleum closet that we'd been herded into that afternoon didn't even have an air conditioner. I was having a lot of trouble following what the speaker was saying. And then it was time for questions, and Umachandra stood up. I have no idea what she asked whichever scientist or politician or agency monkey they'd sent out to entertain us that day.

But I have never forgotten that first glimpse of her. No one sees Umachandra Murdin and forgets her. From where I was sitting, near the back of the room, I could tell that she was an extraordinarily tall woman, well over seven feet, with long jet-black hair and skin that flashed bands of a faint iridescent blue-green in the sunlight coming in through the narrow windows of the meeting room. Later on I'd learn that was the chromatophores and photophores in her skin, inherited from the squid DNA her parents had capped. It didn't take people long to learn how to read Umachandra's moods, simply by noting the shifting colors and patterns of her skin. That day, her hands seemed extremely long and slender, though I couldn't tell from where I was sitting that she had no fingernails. She had a pronounced mid-Atlantic accent and a slight lisp, as though her tongue didn't quite fit inside her narrow jaws.

The cover story was that she'd been recruited as a biostratigrapher and flight tech, but we'd all learn later on that the agency was wild to learn how ph mutants would perform under the stresses of interstellar travel. They had their own eugenics programs, of course, even if the world was busy pretending that they didn't, and the children of the secessionists were a windfall, white mice for the taking. Add to Umachandra's unique physiology an IQ that would have made Einstein, Hawking and Wilcox blush, and she was a prize, indeed. Most of the ph kids suffered severe mental retardation and psychoses, but Umachandra was a shining supernova exception. And I suspect that was one of the pearls in the long string leading to her damnation.

After the meeting, I tried to get a better look at her, shoving and squeezing my way through the crowd towards the front of the room, but she was surrounded by instructors and other recruits. I did get a glimpse of her eyes. Pythons have eyes almost exactly like that.

When the *Montelius* team was finalized in August 2234, almost thirteen months later, I was bray surprised that I'd made the cut. But the fact that Umachandra would be going was, I thought then and still believe now, a foregone conclusion. The four of us – Umachandra, Peter Connor, Joakim, and I – were immediately shipped off to the old Sagan-Mars II complex in Florida to finish out our training, and to impatiently endure the long year until the ship would be ready. Then we'd all be ferried up to the orbital station where the tubes were being assembled by a cabal of now mostly-extinct multinational megacorps that had been awarded ANSA contracts to handle the Gliese program.

One evening in May, I was alone in my room, the lights off, sweating and smoking in the cracker box of a house they'd stuck us all in on Cape Canaveral. I was sipping a Coke and watching the Banana River from my bedroom window, the lights strung out along Merritt Island to the west, out beyond the flat black water. I remember *all* that. I really do. I was supposed to be reading, one of the dozens of advance geological reports from the *Gilgamesh* team. I expect it was right there in the left lens of my I-see unit, unnoticed, forgotten as I stared through the data stream at the world outside my window.

There was a small noise behind me, and I blinked off the computer as I turned to find Umachandra Murdin standing there in my open doorway (we weren't allowed locks), silhouetted by the bright fluorescent lights from the

corridor. In the months we'd spent together in the house, she'd hardly spoken to me, or to Joakim or Peter, for that matter, and we'd all come to accept her taciturn habits. I squinted into the light and motioned for her to come in.

She hesitated a moment or two, glancing over her shoulder as if she were afraid she might have been followed, then quickly stepped into the room and shut the door behind her.

"You can switch on the lights," I said.

"No, I can see," she replied in that accent that could have been Baltimore or Philadelphia and the same faint lisp I'd heard the day I first saw her. "I can see you well enough."

"So, what's ticking?" I asked, trying diligently not to sound surprised that she was there in my room, trying even harder not to show my discomfort at being alone with her for the first time.

"Are you busy?" she replied, still standing with the closed door at her back.

"No, I was only reading," I lied, stubbing out my cigarette in an ashtray on my cluttered desk. "'Baird's third sedimentological report on Quarry 9.'"

"Are you afraid, Audrey?" she interrupted and took one cautious step away from the door.

"Afraid of what?"

Umachandra was silent a moment then, and I got the impression she was trying to decide if she'd made a mistake coming to talk to me. Past the smells of my untidy room and my cigarette smoke, I caught the rose oil she wore in a vain attempt to mask the faintly fishy, faintly musky odor of her body. It was always worse whenever she was excited or nervous.

"It's silly," she whispered. "I shouldn't have bothered you."

"No, it's okay. We've never talked, not really. And I'm sick of these damned reports."

"They're important," she said. "Especially Quarry 9, if Baird and Welles are right, if they're interpreting – "

"Afraid of *what*, Umachandra?" I asked her again, and she stood there in the gloom, staring down at me with her unreadable python eyes flicking back the light of Merritt Island. The bare skin on her arms and shoulders and throat rippled suddenly to life with its own light, unsteady shades of crimson and pink and violet.

“The *mission*,” she said. “No, no, not the mission. That’s not exactly what I mean. I mean the *distance*.”

“I’m afraid,” I admitted, reaching for another cigarette and my lighter, wishing Joakim were there with me. “I think we’d have to be fools not to be scared.”

“I know I have the least to lose. I have no family. I have no friends. Only my work. Only the agency.”

“I don’t think that matters, what we do or don’t have to lose. I don’t think that has anything to do with being afraid.”

“I’ve been having bad dreams,” she said, and a vivid cascade of reds washed across her flesh.

“We have our psych evaluations next week. You should mention them then, if it’s really bothering you.”

“They’re not telling us something.”

I laughed, though I knew at once that I shouldn’t have, that she would think I was laughing at her, though I wasn’t. “They’re not telling us a *lot* of things,” I said and lit my cigarette.

“Audrey, I don’t think they’ve even told us why we’re going to Piros. I don’t think we have any idea what this is really about.”

“Then we’ll find out when we get there,” I said. “If you’re right, it’s nothing we can do anything about. We can only do our jobs.”

“I know I have the least to lose,” she said again, and her skin faded to a pale, unwavering orange.

“Well, then, maybe you also have the most to gain,” I suggested. She wasn’t saying anything that I hadn’t thought of already, nothing Joakim and I hadn’t discussed, and that night, with the Atlantic wind pressing at the walls and windows of our little house by the sea, I didn’t welcome anyone else’s paranoia.

“I’m sorry I bothered you,” she said, turning to leave, and perhaps I should have stopped her. Perhaps I should have called her back and been patient and understanding, sympathetic, all those simply human attributes I was never any fucking good at being. She would have said more, I think. She might have told me her nightmares, whatever was scaring her so badly that she’d actually come to my room to try and talk, and then, seventeen years later, things might have gone differently. Peter and Umachandra might have made it back to Earth, and Joakim might have made it back with his mind intact. I might have lived a different life.

“Anytime,” I said. “Get some sleep. I bet you’ll feel better in the morning.”

Umachandra Murdin left my room without saying another word. After she’d pulled the door closed, and I was alone again, I removed the I-see and sat smoking, staring at the moonlight reflected in the glittering, polluted waters of the Banana River, trying not to think about Piros and unable to think about anything else.

The lounge doors slid closed behind Umachandra at exactly the same moment the controls on the armrest of Joakim’s chair decided to kick in. The grey wall of the *Montelius* dissolved a second time; I looked quickly down at my feet, those ridiculous woolly white slippers, but not before I’d gotten another glimpse of that darkness spread out before and behind and around us.

“Magellan has an uplink with Piros,” Umachandra said, sounding excited and not the least bit hung over from all her years in stasis. “They’ve been talking for the last three days.”

“Is Peter awake?” I asked.

Joakim snorted. “Those dotty bastards better be preparing the welcoming party to end all goddamned welcoming parties, that’s all I’ve got to say. And there better be beer. *Real* beer.”

“Is Peter awake, Umachandra?” I asked again.

“There’s been an incident,” she said. And I looked up, looking at her but trying not to see the star field behind her, framing her broad shoulders and narrow, boyish hips. Umachandra was standing with her back to us, staring at the screen. She was naked, and I almost turned away again. Her skin glistened faintly in the lounge lights, like plastic or something invertebrate pulled up from the deep ocean.

“What do you mean?” I asked her. “Is he alive?”

“Connor’s fine,” she replied, without turning away from the screen. “He’ll be up soon. There’s been an incident on Piros.” Then she touched the wall, touching the single red eye of Gliese 876, and the plasma field rippled slightly beneath her fingertips.

“What kind of an incident?” Joakim asked, standing up, and the cloth of his jumpsuit rustled like dry leaves.

“Welles’ crew,” she whispered and pulled her hand back from the screen. “They were mapping a new quarry somewhere out past the Tyndareus Ridge.”

“Jesus,” I said, or something to that that effect, and looked down at my feet again. They were freezing despite the thick fleece slippers.

“So, what the bloody hell happened?” Joakim asked.

“They’re not saying much. Maybe there’s not much to say,” Umachandra said and turned to face us. She seemed calmer now than when she’d first entered the lounge, as though her physical contact with the screen had soothed her nerves somehow. “The news has already been sent back to Earth.”

“Well, that’s pretty fucking pointless,” I grumbled, wanting a cigarette so badly now it almost hurt.

“They have us on long-range approach,” Umachandra said. “We’re locked in. Our instructions are to proceed according to flight plan. Magellan says there’ll be no deviation from procedure, regardless of what’s happened on Piros.”

“Fuck Magellan,” I said and chewed at a thumbnail.

“Sam Welles,” Joakim whispered, sitting back down in his chair. “Christ, I don’t even believe it.”

“We don’t know that they’re dead,” Umachandra said. “All we know is that they’ve been missing for six days. That’s all anyone’s saying.”

“No one goes missing on Piros for six days and lives to write home about it,” Joakim replied.

“He was a professor of yours, Dr. Welles?” Umachandra asked, and Joakim grunted some sort of affirmation.

I glanced over at him, and he was slumped back in his chair, rubbing at his eyes. “What were they even doing that far out?” he asked. “That’s almost a hundred kilometers outside the perimeter.”

“Magellan says the perimeter was expanded four and a half years ago,” Umachandra said and turned back to the screen.

“What the hell for?”

“She didn’t say. I didn’t think to ask. I can request a more extensive report.”

“What fucking difference does it make?” I asked. “They’re dead. No matter how much we know or don’t know, they’re still dead.”

“Most likely,” she agreed, and Joakim laughed a sick sort of laugh.

“There’s more,” Umachandra continued. “Do you want to hear it?”

“Sure,” Joakim replied. “Why the hell not.”

“Baird and Osmolska have both attempted suicide in the last six months. Baird almost succeeded. I got the feeling the droids are all that’s keeping *Gilgamesh* in the sky.”

“That’s just fucking brilliant,” Joakim muttered and stared up at the low, illuminated ceiling of the lounge compartment. “I don’t even believe this shit.”

“All we can do is stick to procedure,” Umachandra said, staring out at our red dwarf lighthouse, impossibly far away and yet only the tiniest fraction of the distance we’d traveled. “That’s all we *can* do, isn’t it? Our jobs.”

I wanted to tell her to shut up, and I wanted to tell Joakim to switch off the goddamn feed, but I didn’t do either. I sat in my chair, listening to the small, clockwork noises leaking from the starship, waiting for my heart to stop beating so fast, and waiting for Peter Connor to come up from medbay.

It’s not as though Piros is a secret. After centuries of various American government, military, and civilian offices losing control of this or that dirty little complot, the agency knew they’d never manage that, not indefinitely, no matter how much they’d have liked to try. With the constant scrutiny from AllPress, TruLize, and fifteen billion snooping souls plugged directly into the hypernet and subcast, with countless invisible h-and-g progs scouring the world’s data streams a trillion times every second, they did the best they could. Because they couldn’t simply tell the actual truth, they concocted a *better* truth, one that people would want to hear, as much as they would ever want to hear anything, and then went to work selling it. Hundreds of billions were funneled into misinformation and disinformation and *pseudo*information and what the subcast larks – at least the few who still bothered with words – used to call “sidetalk” and “lube.” For the most part, it went down like jells and sugar.

Remember, this was only a couple of decades after the big wars in Brazil and Turkey, after the North Atlantic thermohaline circulation finally went to shit and jiz, after the starving and freezing and dying began in earnest, and everyone and his sister was prowling for Jesus or Allah or Buddha anywhere they could find them. And look here, the agency says, we’re really *not* alone, after all. Maybe it’s not god or divine intervention, not exactly, but we’ve been getting signals from this planet only *fifteen* light-years away, clear evidence of extraterrestrial life, and this time it’s not

going to be like Mars and Europa and Titan. This time, there's more than microbes and sea bugs. *This* time, there's a technology so advanced that it'll make things bray again, and the aliens are so goddamned friendly that all we have to do is reach out and *snatch* it.

I was on Europa-Herschel Station, studying fossils from the dredgings near Tectamus Linea. The day the agency announcements were made in Washington and Beijing, Joakim and I were busy with something new from a siltstone wedge near one of the big hydrothermal vent systems, hundreds of tightly-coiled shells about the size of my thumbnail. Back on Earth, I'd have thought they were gastropods. On Europa, they might have been anything. One of the keys to good exopaleontology, I'd learned, is avoiding a reliance on Terran analogies.

Joakim came rushing up from the holding tier with his vidstick, and we plugged in and sat together at my lab pylon for a couple of hours, forgetting our silicified not-snails, listening to the larks and the bureautechs describe an extensive alien mining operation discovered on the largest moon of a gas giant circling a low-mass star somewhere in Aquarius. A PanAmerico-Sino-Brit ship named *Gilgamesh* was already in orbit around the moon, which they'd christened Piros. If the aliens called it something else, the agency wasn't saying. When the "live" feed from the press conference ended, twenty minutes after it had ended all the way back on Earth, and AllPress Offworld switched over to a team of celeb analysts arguing noisily among themselves about the economic, political, and cultural ramifications of the discovery, Joakim tabbed the vidstick and slipped it into a pocket in his coveralls.

I don't know what I said next. I was crying. I remember that, and I also remember that suddenly all the thousands of fossils I'd cataloged from Europan sediments and the hundreds of living species collected by the neobiologists from the ice, and from the sea below the ice, seemed rather unimportant.

But I remember exactly what Joakim said.

"How long have they been keeping this shit from us?"

Good question, I suppose, though it wasn't the first thing that came to *my* mind. But Joakim had grown up in a West End London shitpit that had come up red as cherries when the rioting and the UN and the WHO finally forced inspections of all the old Underground stations. Finding out that you'd spent your childhood parked directly above a few million metric tons

of leaking nuclear and toxic waste, and then watching both your parents die of cancer, can make a cynic of anyone.

“Well, start by figuring in the seventeen and a half years it took that ship to reach the Gliese system,” I said, making what I thought were reasonable assumptions about the *Gilgamesh*’s top speed, knowing ANSA still hadn’t managed to move anything faster than ninety-percent light speed. Joakim nodded his head thoughtfully, the way he always did when I could tell he was only half listening to me. But I went on, because I was really talking to myself, anyway. “And it’s been there a little more than fifteen years, so that’s almost thirty-three years total. But setting up a program for such an extended mission, hell, that might have taken decades, right?”

Back then, there’d only been a handful of manned deep-space expeditions: the *Aegis*, which had traveled almost halfway to Proxima Centauri before things went bad, and the *Endurance*, the first coma tube, which had made it all the way, but never made it back. The crew of the *Prometheus* had gone as far as Barnard’s star and held the distinction of being the only successful deep-space team. And now here was ANSA crowing about the *Gilgamesh*, making it all sound like a walk in the park, these travelers who would have left earth orbit long before I was born.

“Not only that,” Joakim had said, and for just a second, I thought he’d been listening after all. “Not only that, Audrey, but you gotta wonder what they’re holding back? Maybe this whole story’s a hoax, you know, a way of getting everyone’s minds off the mess we’ve made of things. Get ‘em all thinking about salvation from the stars and – ”

“But it *could* be true,” I interrupted, still giddy and not at all ready to be brought crashing down by Joakim’s wizened paranoia and nay saying, and he looked at me and frowned, then nodded his head very, very slowly.

“Maybe,” he said.

“Maybe,” I agreed, needing to believe the newscasts as much or more than I’d ever needed to believe anything in my life. Of course, that’s exactly what ANSA had been counting on, the desperation of a whole planet, and never mind how many lies had been told in the past, how many deceptions and covert fuck-ups, because it might be true. It *might*.

Joakim sighed and rubbed his hands together. “I’ve still got to log all that shite came in off the driller last night. I’ll come back later, and we can get drunk and celebrate and count not-snails until we puke.”

“You’ve still got alcohol?” I asked, having finished off the last of my contraband months before.

“A little something I’ve been saving,” he said, “just in case.” He smiled and disappeared through the lab hatchway, leaving me alone with my plastic trays and microscopes and the two droids that had been assigned to assist me. I kept them switched off most of the time, because the 712s were always a little too chatty, and I liked silence when I worked. Even worse, one of the two had a repeating algorithmic interface glitch, which had given it a habit of picking fights with the other. I’d named the glitchy droid Othniel and the other I called Edward Drinker, after a couple of rival Victorian dinosaur hunters. When Joakim had gone, I thought briefly about switching them on. There wasn’t really anything for them to do, but the company wouldn’t have been so bad. Instead, I had the computer call up something by Chopin or Liszt or Czartoryska (my early twenties were marked by an obsession with 17th-Century pianists) and went back to my fossils, measuring height and width and axis, aperture and spire, but my mind was other places, and I kept making silly arithmetical mistakes.

A few months later, I transmitted a short bioregistry report to Earth, the very last that I’d send from Europa orbit, naming the not-snails as a new genus and species of benthic europmolluscans, *Piros piros*. That was my official (and, looking back, childishly sentimental) acknowledgment of the optimism I felt after learning of the *Gilgamesh*. By then, I’d received my orders to return to Mars, and then to Earth, to begin a training program to select the next group of Gliese-bound astronauts. Joakim got the orders, too, the two of us and a few hundred other exos. He almost filed for exemption, but I talked him into going with me. There’s no way we’d ever make it through the program, I argued, no chance we’d make the cut, but hell, wouldn’t completing the program look nice on our résumés. Then we could get ourselves shipped back out to Jupiter, take up our work more or less where we’d left off, and, in our old age, we could be comforted by the knowledge that at least we’d *tried*.

And now I *am* an old woman, who once was a young woman who went farther than she’d ever dreamed, and I find no comfort at all.

I’d trade these memories for a head full of regret in half a heartbeat.

In a public-pay report on the Piros discovery released a couple of months after my departure from Europa for the agency’s natsci compound near Tharsis, neofuturist Clarke Haley Hernandez wrote, “At long last,

humanity is moving from the failures and missteps of our eons-old childhood, and all Heaven lies before us, with all its promises made manifest at last. We will finally shake free the decaying nursery-prison of the planet that birthed us and, in a moment more, sail clear."

Reading back over a conceited piece of smeg like that, I almost feel better about *Piros piros*.

Of course, the humanity which Hernandez invited to flee its smothering cradle was not without dissenters. In an address from Vatican City, Pope Pius XIV quoted Anaximenes, who is said to have asked Pythagoras, "To what purpose should I trouble myself in searching out the secrets of the stars, having death or slavery continually before my eyes?"

It's time to feed the cats again.

"Why is she naked?" Peter Connor asked, pointing at Umachandra, and Joakim only shrugged and scratched at his beard. Peter had a beard too, but he'd always had a beard, as long I'd known him. He was the only one of us who'd done most of his work on Earth. After a postdoc at Johns Hopkins, he'd taken a job at the Carnegie and had done a lot with Tertiary mammals in places like Utah and Wyoming and Mexico, collecting samples for biomolecular studies and DNA extraction. Then Carnegie sent him away to Mars, and Peter made a name for himself working the Isidis Basin. All those years in the field had left their mark on his face and hands, and he could have easily been mistaken for a man ten or fifteen years his senior. Sometimes, I fancied that Peter Connor looked the way all paleontologists had looked, once upon a time.

He was dressed almost the same as Joakim, the same blue ANSA jumpsuit, but was also wearing gloves and a synthwool cap pulled down tight over his curly blond hair.

"You *have* noticed that she's naked?"

"Why don't you ask *her*?" I muttered, realizing that I was getting a headache and wondering if I had the energy to walk all the way back down to medbay. I decided to let it hurt a while. I might get lucky and find clarity buried somewhere in the pain.

"I was preoccupied," Umachandra said irritably, still staring at the screen on the wall. "I needed to talk with Magellan as soon as the mechs were done, and I didn't think to dress first. Does it matter?"

"Hey, I was only asking. I thought I might be missing something."

“I was preoccupied,” she said again, not taking her eyes off Gliese 876. “If it makes you uncomfortable – ”

“Not in the least,” Peter replied, and sat down across the table from Joakim and me. He smiled and then winked at Joakim. The red and grey 712 buzzed over to serve him coffee and biscuits that he completely ignored. “But you’ve gotta be freezing your tits off, lady. It’s a fucking icebox in here.”

“I’m warm enough,” she told him, her skin rippling with burgundy light to betray her annoyance, and suddenly I wanted to slap her. Perhaps it was the headache, the dull throb behind my eyes making me anxious, making me worry that the droids might have missed something. But I wanted to slap her and tell her to go to her quarters and put some goddamn clothes on, that maybe the rest of us didn’t want to see her naked. Even after stasis, Umachandra Murdin looked strong and healthy, but her parents’ genetic abuse had left its telltale scars on her body, deformities that would have been hard enough to face without the headache and a coma hangover. The twisted, uneven mass of flesh just above the base of her spine, big around as my wrist and sprouting from her thoracolumbar fascia like a tangle of unfinished tentacles. Or the ugly patches of jet-black ganoid scales dappling her shoulders. Or the dozens of perfectly-formed suction cups scattered across the backs of her legs like some strange rash or malignancy. Joakim once said to me, not long after we were moved from Texas to the Cape Canaveral compound, that he didn’t see the point of traveling almost ninety trillion miles just to find aliens when we had Umachandra right there on Earth.

“Clean bills of health all round?” Peter asked, and I nodded, and Joakim nodded, too. Umachandra didn’t say anything. “Then I propose a toast,” and Peter lifted his cup. “To us, because we aren’t dead.”

“Not yet,” Joakim added and half-heartedly clunked his mug against Peter’s. “Magellan says things ain’t so daisy on *Gilgamesh*. In a few days, we might be docking with a ghost ship.”

“He’s exaggerating,” I said.

Joakim glared at me a moment and then told Peter everything we knew, or thought we knew, which really wasn’t all that much: Welles’ missing team, the expanded perimeter, the unsuccessful suicide attempts by Jack Baird and Anastazja Osmolska, the possibility that the droids were all that were holding the ship together.

“Well, then, there you go,” Peter said when Joakim was done. He laughed grimly and put his feet up on the table. “And what did Magellan have to say about all this?”

“We’re on approach,” Umachandra said. “They have us locked.”

“I think I want to go back to sleep now, please,” Peter mumbled and sipped at his coffee.

“Look, guy. We all knew from the get-go how risky this mission would be,” Joakim said, trying to sound composed, trying to sound stoic. “Whatever’s happening on *Gilgamesh*, all we can do right now is wait and see. Maybe it’s not as bad as Magellan’s making it out to be. Anyway, regardless, there’s no point panicking.”

“Magellan said the situation is under control,” Umachandra said, glancing at us over her left shoulder. I could see by her flickering skin that she was a lot more concerned than she was willing to admit. “We have to trust her. She’s gotten us this far.”

“Umachandra, I don’t think anyone’s saying that the problem’s with Magellan,” Peter said and set his coffee cup down. “I think it’s the rendezvous we have to worry about. Who knows what sort of shape the *Gilgamesh*’s mainframe is in by now? Osmolska was their chief AI tech.”

“Magellan says it’s working fine.”

“Has she scanned for resets? Is there any chance Osmolska might have set up a doppelgänger? Does Magellan have access to the shell?”

“She’s working on it,” Umachandra Murdin replied, and turned back to the screen.

“She’d better work fast. We only have ten days – ”

“Nine,” Joakim corrected. “We only have nine days, Peter.”

“Two hundred and eight hours,” Umachandra said and touched the screen again. The sound of her fingertips brushing plasma made me think of meat frying.

Peter Connor shot her an exasperated glare, then leaned forward and picked up one of his biscuits, but set it right back down again. “Osmolska could have done a lot of damage, Joakim. You know that.”

“Of course I know that, Peter. But there’s nothing we can do, is there? We listen to Magellan. We wait and see and hope that – ”

“I’m getting a headache,” I cut in. “I think I’m going back down to the mb to take something for it,” and I stood up too quickly, bumping my knee hard against the table. Coffee sloshed from our cups, and the tabletop

absorbed it immediately. Joakim asked if I wanted him to walk me to the lift, and I said no. Peter said he was sure it was nothing serious. And Umachandra watched the red dwarf, like a cobra watching its fakir, and said nothing at all.

I think I'm going to skip some things here. What Joakim said to me and what I said to him after he followed me out into the corridor on my way to medbay. The eight days of physical and mental therapy preparing us for the rigors of Piros. The violent argument that Peter and Umachandra had over nothing much at all the day before we docked. My headache that refused to get better and which the mechs could find no cause for. I'm sure all these things are important, in their own way, maybe even more important than things I've written down already. They are all pieces of the puzzle, but the first of my three ballpoints is beginning to run dry, and I'm determined to finish telling this story the way that I started it.

What I will say is that I was unaccustomed to fear, most especially to a fear of the unknown. Even as a child, I was an eager explorer, always wandering as far, or considerably farther, than my parents allowed, and thoughts of my physical safety rarely crossed my mind. At university, I did field work in the Sahara, Antarctica, and the Australian outback. I'd once spent two weeks as the unwilling "guest" of a group of Sudanese rebels, but returned at once to my work in Bahr El Ghazal when the government coughed up the ransom money that was being asked for my safe return. I'd trained on Mars and spent more than a year working Europa-Herschel. I'd been part of one of the first teams to set foot on Titan. Before the *Montelius* left for Piros, I'd genuinely believed that I was accustomed to isolation, on earth and in space, to life in remote, uninhabited places, to the demands and stress of living in extremely hostile environments, and to getting along with my colleagues. By the cold red light of Gliese 876, I realized that all of my treasured confidence was only arrogance and ignorance. Nothing could have prepared me, or the others, for that mission. Nothing could have ever made me, or anyone else, strong enough.

Get on with it, already.

On December 17th, 2252, six days after we were awakened, at exactly 1800 GMT, we were met by an unmanned escort probe from the *Gilgamesh*. We'd already passed by the outermost planets in the system – rocky, barren Cronos wrapped in its caul of methane, ethane, and carbon-monoxide ice,

only a little larger than Pluto; a wide asteroid belt that was all that remained of a long-lost Earth-sized planet, destroyed in some ancient cataclysm; and the gas giant Procris – and we were still better than twenty-five million kilometers from Piros.

I sat with Joakim on the observation deck and watched the two tireless droids that had piloted the *Monty* those last seven and a half ship-years, as they spoke with the probe in their chattery machine languages. Minor course adjustments were made, and the final stage of our deceleration began as the forward thrusters fired three quick bursts, and the droids shut down the hydrogen scoop. For a moment, the ship shuddered around us alarmingly, and my stomach lurched. But then the turbulence passed.

"Damn," Joakim said, "I think I might have dropped a kidney back there."

"What do you really think we're going to find?" I asked him, letting my body relax again after the jolt. The somaform padding of my chair molded itself about me and radiated a gentle, reassuring warmth. I didn't look at him, watched the droid pilots instead, wondering if anyone had ever bothered to name them, and, if not, had they named themselves?

"You've read the same reports I have, Audrey."

"You think any of that matters anymore? I mean, even if the *Gilgamesh* isn't a toss case, you think we're going to be measuring sections and collecting samples? If we've lost – "

"We don't know what we've lost."

"We know we've lost Welles, and three crew members with him. We know Baird and Osmolska probably aren't doing a lot of science these days."

"We pick up the pieces. We do what we can do."

"We try to stay alive," I said, and he sighed and nodded his head.

"That, too."

On the narrow flight deck below us, one of the droids made a sudden noise like an antique teletype, the sort you hear on the old news vids. I flinched, and Joakim put a hand on the left leg on my jumpsuit.

"Why would the Agency have sent us on a suicide mission?" he asked, but I had no idea how I was supposed to reply to that. I wasn't even certain what he'd meant.

"They couldn't have foreseen any of this," I said.

“They lied to the rest of the world. It’s not unreasonable to think they may have lied to us, as well.”

I shook my head and watched as the pilot that had made the teletype noise opened its chest and began fiddling about with its pale, silicone innards.

“Why did they waste so much time and energy and money sending out another load of rock hounds?” he asked me. “If the mining operations on Piros really were abandoned five hundred years ago, and if the agency wants the tech, why not send engineers and mechanics?”

“I’m sure they will. “

“When, Audrey? When we’ve cleaned up some mess down there that they’re not even willing to tell us about?”

“I don’t think we’re in much shape to clean up anything.”

“So maybe they just want us to tell them what the fuck they’re dealing with. I mean, don’t you keep asking yourself why the aliens abandoned Piros in the first place? If the mineral survey reports are anything close to accurate, why aren’t they still there?”

“I don’t know. Because bad shit happens,” I replied, wishing he hadn’t started this, that he’d waited until we reached the *Gilgamesh* to begin asking the hard questions, wishing I had one or two of the answers he was looking for. “There could have been a war that ended the operations. Maybe they found a better source closer to home. We’re talking about an entire civilization. And shit happens to civilizations. There’s nothing mysterious about that. Didn’t you ever have an archaeology class?”

“No,” he said. “But, since you mention it, why didn’t they send archaeologists?”

“They did. Osmolska has an MA in archaeology.”

“If the reports are telling us the truth, the aliens seem to have left in one hell of a hurry, at least the ones who *could* leave.”

“Shit happens,” I said for a third time, and asked my chair to remove the safety restraints.

“You’re beginning to sound like a bloody parrot, you know that?”

“I’ve got hydro in ten,” I said, getting to my feet once the heavy somaform folds had released me. I tapped at the timepiece on my belt. “We can continue this afterwards, if you really think we should. Weren’t you Mr. Wait-and-See? Aren’t you the one always said all that claptrap about the *Aegis* was only a lot of spook stories?”

“My sorry ass wasn’t stuck aboard the *Aegis*, and neither was yours.”

And then I was thinking about the last time we’d made love, two weeks before we left Canaveral. “It’s all gonna be fine,” I said, whether I believed it or not. “You’ll see. We’ll dock tomorrow, and it’ll all be bray.”

“Right,” he said unconvincingly, and looked away from me.

“I don’t know what else to say.”

“I just need some time to think,” he said very softly.

And then I went to my hydrotherapy session, leaving Joakim alone on the obs deck, staring intently up at the wavering holovid of the guide probe from *Gilgamesh*, his blue eyes watching the long banks of monitors mounted above the pilots’ stations. I saw only darkness and stars on those screens. I’ll never be sure what Joakim saw there.

II.

The Second Pen

I’m making mistakes. Read back over all these pages, and you’ll see that I’m making mistakes. For instance, if Umachandra Murdin’s parents had taken part in the posthumanist secession in the “late twenties,” she’d have only been seven or eight years old when the *Montelius* team was chosen in 2234. When we left for Piros, she was in her early thirties, and, in fact, the secession ended in Manhattan in 2201, with the Chinatown Christmas riots and the subsequent quarantine of Roosevelt Island. There are other things I’ve gotten wrong, I’m sure of it. But I don’t want to waste the ink correcting them all. You can find the inconsistencies, if you’re reading this, if you think they matter. I suspect they don’t. They’re probably only errors of *fact*, not errors of *truth*.

On December 18th, we reached Piros and the *Gilgamesh*, locked in its geosynchronous orbit above the moon. I’d been in my quarters, feeling better than I’d felt since coma, feeling almost fit again after the daily ministrations of the medtechs. I was lying in my bunk, listening to Chopin (or Listz, or whoever) reading something, most likely re-reading one of Sam Welles’ monographs on Pirosan biogeochronology, or the morphological investigations of the remains of the alien miners that had been recovered; something of the sort. Joakim commed me, and I know I felt dread, but I might also have felt a dim sort of elation. We had come so far, given up so much to see the things that lay ahead of us. I dressed and was on the obs deck in less than ten minutes. Joakim was there, leaning over the railing, watching the screens and the droids, and Umachandra and Peter were there as well. She was plugged in, oblivious to the rest of us and the images on the screens, skizzing along with the navigational subsystems, negotiating the silicon labyrinth of Magellan’s directional relay and triangulation and graviton praps. Peter Connor was sitting, chewing at the stem of one of his pipes and not taking his eyes off the images of the *Gilgamesh* and the brick-red moon and swirling storm-purple-scarlet-viridian expanse of Cecrops consuming all but an ebony rind of the background. At least Umachandra was dressed.

“Roll seven point twelve degrees port,” I heard one of the droids call out and then heard positioning jets humming below us, and the images on the screen began to rotate.

“She looks well,” Joakim said hopefully and pointed at the *Gilgamesh*.

“Oh, yeah. Pretty red apple with just a few fat green worms inside,” Peter muttered, and Joakim gave him a dirty look.

“Do we even have a channel open?” I asked, and Joakim shook his head and frowned.

“The mechs say we’re acknowledged and cleared,” he told me, “and Murdin says they’re recalibrating their field gennys for the coupling. But so far it’s all just droid-to-droid shite. Baird’s not answering. *No one’s* answering – ”

“No one *human*,” Peter cut in.

“Same goddamn difference.”

In January 2001, the discovery of a second planet orbiting Gliese 876 was announced by a team of scientists from NASA’s Ames Research Center, the University of California at Santa Cruz and Berkeley, NASA’s Astrobiology Institute, the Carnegie Institute, and the University of New York at Stony Brook (I have these facts written down in front of me). Of course, back then, every new extrasolar planet was cause for a press conference, and the Gliese bodies even more so, as they marked the first time anyone had detected strong orbital resonance between two extrasolar planets. The outermost of the two was christened GJ876c, a gas giant less than sixty percent the mass of Jupiter. It wouldn’t get the name Cecrops for another seventy-odd years. Cecrops, of course, was the first King of Attica, a half-human, half-dragon hybrid. Cecrops chose Athena over Poseidon to serve as the protector of Athens.

“Steady,” one of the droids said softly, as external cameras showed us the alignment of the *Monty*’s umbilicus with the *Gilgamesh*’s starboard docking web.

“We’re coming in too fast,” Umachandra warned, and I felt the positioning jets fire again. “That’s better,” she said, like a mother encouraging a clumsy child.

“Extending umbilicus,” a droid said. “Contact in 8, 7, 6,” and “Better hold onto something,” Umachandra said, acknowledging the rest of us for the first time since I’d arrived on the deck. “Something’s not right. I think there’s too much spin.”

And then the two starships touched, one ramming itself hard into the other, the *Montelius* playing rapacious male, *in flagrante delicto* tens of thousands of kilometers above the great red moon of Cecrops. The force of the impact caught me off guard, despite Umachandra's warning, and I would have fallen if Joakim hadn't caught me. The lights flashed off, then came back crimson a second or two later, and throughout the *Monty*, sirens began to wail.

"Fuck," Peter growled. "What the hell sort of maneuver do you call *that*, Magellan?"

"It wasn't Magellan," Umachandra said, and then began unplugging herself from the console. "The *Gilgamesh* fired its number two jets three seconds before contact. There wasn't time to compensate."

"Did we take damage?" Joakim asked her, releasing me when he saw I had a firm grip on the rail.

"Nothing very serious. But we're probably going to have to do a bit of rerouting to get the crewlock to function. Some of the hatch circuitry is fried."

Joakim stared at her and spit on the floor at his feet. "We can't even open the fucking hatch?" he asked, and I saw there was blood in his spittle, coral-pink against the aluminum deck.

"There's already a maintenance unit on its way down," Umachandra replied.

Peter stood up and covered his ears. "Can someone *please* shut those damn things off?"

"They're all rigged on the same central tocsin autotimer," Umachandra said, shaking her head and removing the last black-and-yellow jackstrip from her left temple. "Thirty-five seconds more and they should begin cycling down," but in the next instant the alarms all fell silent at once, as if to mock her, and Peter Connor laughed and turned towards the monitors.

"So, just how much shit are we in, Uma?" he asked, and I think that was the first time I'd ever heard anyone call Umachandra Murdin by a diminutive or nickname. I glanced at Joakim, and he shrugged.

"Get someone on the window," he called down to the pilots, but they both seemed to ignore him, busy with their intricate, colorful tiers of touchpads and toggles and flickering display screens.

"The tocsins have stopped," Joakim said, turning to Umachandra. "Why are the lights still red?"

“After the impact, Magellan went to auxiliary power,” she replied. “She’ll wait until she’s certain there are no hull breaches or internal malfunctions before switching back to primary.”

“But the tocsins – ”

“I don’t know, Joakim. I just don’t know.”

And I stood there, gripping the railing so hard that my knuckles had gone numb and pale, watching the frenetic movements of the pilots and the images on the vidscreens, everything washed bloody and dark beneath the auxiliary lighting, everything washed unreal.

On the largest screen, one of the *Montelius*’ remote cameras, a tethered short drag-module released when our proximity monitors signaled that we’d come within fifty kilometers of the *Gilgamesh*, painted real-time SROLED images. The *Monty* and the *Gilgamesh* fused one to the other like monstrous insects, hanging there above the equator of Piros, and behind it all, the great disk of Cecrops’ northern hemisphere. The brilliant snakeskin bands of the planet’s roiling atmosphere, ammonia and water vapor and phosphine, standing guard more than 1.6 million miles beyond its moon.

The ancient Greeks believed that Cecrops taught mankind to bury its dead.

One of the pilots turned and looked up at us, its eyes glowing faintly in the dim red light. “We have a signal coming in on Channel 2,” it said, it or she, whichever Joakim would have had me think. “It’s a synthetic,” the android added.

“Patch it through,” Joakim replied, and the pilot nodded and moved its hands deftly across the controls. My view of the ships and Piros and Cecrops was abruptly replaced by a shot of the *Gilgamesh*’s bridge. A smiling, violet-eyed droid stared back at us. She was dressed in blue coveralls with the requisite logo of the agency’s AI-tech division stitched just above her left breast.

“Greetings, crew of the *Montelius*,” the droid said in that same comforting, lilting voice I’d awakened to only nine days before.

“Jesus,” Joakim whispered, and looked back at Peter.

“We need to speak with Subcommander Baird,” I said, never mind whatever might be left of protocol, that Joakim should have spoken first. “Our docking mechanism – ”

“I’m sorry, Dr. Cather, but Subcommander Baird is presently unavailable. However, perhaps I can be – ”

“Is there anyone *human* that we can speak to?” Joakim asked impatiently, and the droid paused before responding.

“Not presently,” she said.

“Where *are* they, then?”

“There have been complications, Commander Hamilton.”

“What exactly do you *mean*, ‘complications,’” Joakim demanded, and I knew him well enough to see how close he was to dropping any pretext at civility. Again, the droid paused, as if choosing its words very carefully.

“Regrettably, it has been necessary, Commander, to relieve *Gilgamesh*’s human crew from active service. Under Section 17-12C, paragraph 6 – ”

“They fucking took over the goddamn ship,” Peter muttered. “The plastic fucks mutinied.”

On the screen, the droid blinked once and stared directly at Peter. “No, Dr. Connor. It was not a mutiny. It was a legal action, necessary to insure the safety of the *Gilgamesh*, and the safety of the *Montelius*, as well. As I said, there have been complications.”

“Is Dr. Baird alive?” Joakim asked before Peter could say anything more.

“Yes sir. He is alive and physically well.”

“Physically? But not *mentally* well?”

“It would be best, Commander, if we discussed this aboard the *Gilgamesh*. I have reason to believe this channel is no longer secure.”

“Secure from *whom*?” Umachandra asked, her voice almost as calm as the android’s. The synth stared silently at her a long moment, then glanced quickly over its shoulder.

“Secure from whom?” Umachandra asked again.

“As I have said, there have been complications.”

“Give it up, folks. We’re not getting anywhere with this bitch,” Peter whispered and sat down again.

“Our hatch is jammed,” I said. “The airlock may have been damaged.”

“Yes, Dr. Cather. *Gilgamesh* also suffered minor damage in the collision. We’ve dispatched a crew to aid in the repair of your airlock. Should that prove impractical, we’ll use one of the shuttles to bring your crew over.”

“There’s been no word from Welles?” Joakim asked and wiped sweat from his forehead with his hand.

“No sir, there hasn’t. But we have drones on the surface. We haven’t abandoned hope. I am relieved by your arrival.”

“Is there anything we can do to help with the airlock?” Umachandra asked. “One of our SJ4s is working on it from this side.”

“Thank you. We will synchronize our efforts, Dr. Murdin. You should all prepare to leave the *Montelius*. We’ll be bringing you through as soon as we can.”

“Yeah,” Joakim said wearily. “You got it,” and the transmission ended, replaced immediately by the previous view of the two starships, the moon, and the gas giant.

“You think she’s telling us the truth?” I asked Joakim.

“Of course,” Umachandra answered. “Of course, she’s telling the truth. Her programming won’t permit her to act otherwise.”

“Horseshit,” Joakim said. “Droids can lie, and we all know that droids can fucking lie. We won’t know what’s going on over there until we’re aboard.”

“If then,” Peter added unhelpfully.

“If then,” Joakim agreed. “Murdin, I want a wrap on Magellan. If the *Gilgamesh*’s mainframe is contaminated, I don’t want it getting in here.”

“There’s absolutely no reason to believe – ”

“Will you just fucking *do it*, okay? Please? I’ve got to see what that lock looks like.”

And then the primary lights buzzed loudly and kicked on again; I squinted and blinked and rubbed my eyes while Peter Connor followed Joakim from the obs deck, and Umachandra followed orders and plugged herself back into Magellan.

Almost a week has passed since I began writing these things down. I usually write late at night, when I can’t sleep. The sound of the wind and the snow at the windows makes me dislike the darkness of my bedroom. I have a writing desk in the front room, and I sit here in my robe and slippers and try to remember what happened next, and next, and next after that. Sometimes the wind is so loud that I listen to music to block out the constant roar and wail, something from one of the NeoModernist composers or, other times, early American folk ballads. I have a nice set of Ito low-immersion tymphonics, so I can play music as loud as I please late at night without bothering the neighbors. The walls of this old place are thin.

Sometimes, though, I forget about the cats, because I can't hear their meowing through Pritchard's 8th Symphony or "Frankie and Johnny," and the cats wake up the neighbors. I'd get rid of them if I could, the cats, if I could stand to be alone. I have a couple of old tidybots that keep the dust in check and the toilet clean, and there's a synth girl, Zoraya, who lives down the hall and looks in on me now and then, but that's not the same as having something biological for company. Something almost as frail and needy as myself.

There are three cats sharing the apartment with me now: a fat ginger tom named Matthieu, a skinny, young black and white tom named Léon, and a calico lady that I call Sabine. I suspect she had another name before I found her scrounging for scraps during last June's blizzards. She had a collar, but no tags or identichips. So now she's Sabine, and she'll just have to get used to it, if she hasn't already.

I'm off on a tangent, aren't I? When I woke this morning, late for a lecture, I lay in bed a few minutes as the shreds of a dream about Umachandra Murdin faded away. And I thought about ending this here. Just stopping and putting the pages away somewhere, in some desk drawer where no one will look until long after I'm dead. Or I could send them down to the incinerator. Or I could wind it all up with an apple lie. I could say, "And then Joakim decided to override the mission programming and, after an argument with Umachandra, the four of us reentered stasis only a few days after freeing the *Monty* from the *Gilgamesh*." I could be very, very audacious, and I could write, "They all lived happily ever after." Or simply, "They all lived."

I'm wasting ink. I'm aware I'm wasting ink.

There are wide, north-facing bay windows in front of my writing desk. The original glass was replaced ages ago with thick panes of permaclear that distort everything, but only a little. Sealants keep the wind out and a network of thermal filaments imbedded in the permaclear helps the flat stay warm. On sky days, I have a good view of île-Saint-Louis crouched in the frozen Seine, icebound Paris stretching away to its ancient boundaries and the sprawl beyond. The sky is good to see on those days, the Persian-blue skies that at least look clean, though I draw the curtains on cloudless nights, because I can no longer bear the sight of stars.

They always seem to be watching, and it doesn't matter knowing how far away those watchers must be. How long it would take anything from out

there to reach *here*, because I can see them, and I imagine (yes, I *imagine*) that they can see me. That they've been watching me for decades. After Piros, during the long quarantine in Mars orbit, one of the psychiatrists pinned me as *astrophobic*, suffering from a morbid fear of stars and other celestial bodies, which, of course, ended my career in exo. Well, that and about a dozen other diagnoses, and the fact that I'd have cut my own throat before signing up for another coma tube. But yes, I am afraid of stars.

I am an old woman with three cats, an apartment filled with petrified bones and moldering books and antique discs and data beads, living on a lecturer's salary and an agency pension, and I am afraid of stars.

And I am wasting ink.

But I cannot sleep, and I'm not quite ready to move on to the next part of the story, that part of my life that has *become* a story, the passage through the damaged crewlock from *Montelius* to the *Gilgamesh*. The first conversation with the synth that had assumed command of the vessel. The conversation with Baird that followed. And so on. Perhaps tomorrow night I can begin to write those things. But not tonight.

Perhaps I should burn these pages.

Two months ago, I delivered a lecture on Europan paleoecology at the Galerie de paléontologie et d'anatomie comparée, and, afterwards, when the floor was opened to questions, a student with an Australian accent, a tall blonde girl, asked if I would discuss the Gliese expeditions. I glanced nervously at the monitor standing a few feet to my left, and he shook his head in that slow, serious, not-quite-threatful way that academic monitors shake their heads. I nodded at him and politely told the girl it was a subject I was forbidden to discuss, as I'd signed various confidentiality docs and, besides, it wasn't the subject of the lecture.

"But you were part of the *Montelius* crew, weren't you?" she asked. "You *were* there?"

I looked at the monitor again, a muscular African man, his eyes hidden safely behind a cluster of implants; he was speaking into the microphone in his left palm. Which meant he was hooked and briefing security, and decisions were already being made about how the situation should be dealt with. He shook his head again, more forcefully than before, and I nodded again and smiled for him, then ignored the girl and pointed at the clock on the wall. I thanked them all and made up a lie about needing to examine

Argentinean mollusks in the collections before heading home. There was a half-hearted smattering of applause as I exited the auditorium.

You were *there?*

Was I?

Am I absolutely fucking sure?

The next day, I heard that the girl, a New Zealander whose name is Jedda Callahan, was detained after the lecture and taken in for questioning. She was released a few hours later, when her scans came up clean, but I knew that she'd be followed for weeks or months, that she'd been classed Yellow-3 or higher. The agency knows well enough that there are plenty of ecoterrorist cells and anti-spacers and religious fundamentalists who'd love to be able to pump their propaganda banks with a clearer picture of what really happened on Piros. ANSA understands the damage that would be done, the possible cost to their extrasolar programs and the industries that rely on them, and they're careful. They're watchful, like the stars. I've often wondered why they ever allowed Joakim and me to leave quarantine. They certainly didn't have to. No one who mattered would have doubted whatever cover story they concocted to explain our deaths. But the agency has always been twelve deep into taking calculated risks, and there must have been something more they needed from us.

I cannot begin to guess what that something was.

Joakim had his theories, but Joakim is dead now, and I don't like to think about them.

There's the four A.M. aerobus, its red and blue strobes shining faintly through the snow and sleet as it passes slowly above the rue de Rivoli, heading west towards the new Vanves terminal. And I should go to bed. I should feed the cats and then go to bed. I've said enough for now, even *if* all of this has only been a waste of ink.

Tomorrow night, I'll do better.

It took almost five hours to get the umbilicus' airlock and life-support systems operational again. Umachandra spent most of the time with Magellan's gateway, setting up extra scarps and counterscarps, resetting passwords and access codes. She even uploaded an old-fashioned firewall in case there were problems with the AI's native router functions. While Peter and I packed the away-pods, Joakim sat in his cabin, dictating a crisis report to ANSA – everything we knew, and, I suppose, everything he

suspected – about the problems aboard *Gilgamesh*. In fifteen years, his words would finally reach the outer stations, instant history for anyone who might still be around to give a shit. He directed the signal along all the present, and three-projected, tube lanes, knowing it could reach other travelers long before it eventually reached Earth. When Umachandra had finally unplugged and we'd received a green light from the synths aboard *Gilgamesh*, he ordered us all into our white EVA suits.

Down in the transfer bay, we checked and double-checked seals and pressure gauges, cooling systems and resp-units. A COmembrane on my breathing scrub was damaged and had to be replaced, and one of Joakim's oxygen packs was nearly twenty percent suboptimal. He popped it and slipped a full cartridge into the slot on the left leg of his suit, while Umachandra bitched about hers, which was too tight despite modifications for her height. Peter sat on one of the yellow away-pods, his helmet in his lap, staring silently through the crewlock's porthole.

"This is ridiculous," Umachandra muttered, struggling with a sticky seam in her suit. "It's not even ten meters, and Magellan says – "

"It's just a precaution," Joakim interrupted and then handed me my helmet.

"Well, it's a fucking silly precaution," Umachandra shot back, and the skin on her face, the only part of her not hidden inside the suit, flushed an annoyed yellow-orange. "You actually think they're going to get us all in there and then space us?"

"No, I don't," he replied, "because we're going through one at a time. I'll be first, then you, then Audrey, and I want Peter to be the last one of us across. If anything goes wrong, whoever's left on this side is to disengage at once."

"We don't know what's happened over there," Peter said. "Hell, for all we know, everyone's dead."

Umachandra sighed loudly and checked the seals on her gloves. "If *humans* had told you what that synth told you, you wouldn't be acting like this, Peter."

"And your point is?"

"That you're behaving like a bigot."

"We're talking about droids," Joakim said, sounding almost as annoyed as the flicker of Umachandra's chromatophores and photophores.

“These aren’t Brazilian refugees or ph children, they’re just fucking droids.”

“No, they’re *not* droids, Commander Hamilton, they’re synths – ”

“Same shit, Murdin. They’re machines, and sometimes machines malfunction. *All* machines malfunction.”

“Obviously, so do humans,” she replied and slipped her helmet on. There was a faint hiss as the autoseams around her neck melded and a dull click when her resp tanks switched on.

Neither Joakim nor Peter replied. I put my helmet on, locking myself away in the bubble, entrusting my life to another set of machines. I doubted Joakim would have appreciated the irony, and so I didn’t point it out to him. The inside of the helmet smelled like plastic, and I wished he had put me second in the queue, instead of Umachandra; I wanted to get through the umbilicus and out of the EVA suit as quickly as possible. I don’t think it was the same distrust of the synths that was affecting Joakim and Peter. It was a much larger and less focused dread. I needed to know what the hell had gone wrong over there, so that this unknown could begin to become the known, so that things would start to make sense to me again, and then maybe I’d have a chance against the anxiety and fear that had begun clouding my mind.

A couple of minutes later and we all had our helmets on. Joakim made us each go through a comms check and a fourth comp systems check. We all came up bray, and he stepped past Peter Connor to the manual controls beside the hatchway.

“The mercury’s reading 977 millibars,” he said, his voice made thin and tinny by the suit’s speakers. “And the gas mix looks good. A little high on the oxygen, but within limits. Grav readings are normal. The temps about seven-point two, so at least I don’t think we’ll freeze to death.”

“Clearly, those evil robots want us *inside* the trap before they spring it,” Umachandra said, sarcasm and contempt fairly dripping from her comms.

“Shut up, Uma,” Peter said. “You’re not helping.”

“I wasn’t trying to be helpful. Maybe they’ve rigged the umbilicus with zimax charges.”

“Please,” I said, “can we just get this over with?”

Joakim nodded and punched in the new twenty-digit access code that Umachandra had given him only moments before. There was a loud hiss as

the air pressure in the transfer bay and the umbilicus began to equalize, and Joakim thumbed back two red safety clips, unlocking the hatchway.

“When I’m through, I’ll signal for Umachandra to follow,” he said. “Do *not* start across until I’ve sent the signal.” Then he raised the heavy release lever to the left of the control panel, and the hatchway slid open. “Peter, you’ll close the hatch as soon as I’m through. The SJ4 will shut it after you.”

“Be careful,” I said, and he nodded and stepped across the threshold, into that hallway the same unrelenting white as our EVA suits. The walls and floor and ceiling were like the inside of a giant’s accordion, and Joakim kept to the narrow aluminum catwalk. There were handgrips overhead, but he wouldn’t need them as long as the gravity held.

Ten meters, I thought, remembering what Umachandra had said, and I clenched my gloved fists. *Not even ten meters from this side to that side.* How quickly could I walk ten meters? Thirty seconds, easy, even moving slowly, cautiously, even stuck inside an EVA suit, thirty or forty seconds at the most.

But how many things can go wrong in only thirty or forty seconds?

When Peter closed the hatch again, the matching hatchway at the far end of the umbilicus still hadn’t opened. And I counted on my fingers and waited. Peter watched through the porthole, and Umachandra fiddled with the settings on her communication bud.

“It’s open,” Peter said after what seemed like ten or twenty minutes. “He’s through.”

“Maybe they want to get us all aboard the *Gilgamesh* before they kill us,” Umachandra said, and a few seconds later our comms crackled. “I’m fine,” Joakim said. “Red Rover, Red Rover – ”

“Now, open the fucking hatch, Peter, before I suffocate in this contraption,” Umachandra said, and he raised the lever and lowered it again when she was inside the passageway.

“She’s terrified,” he said to me, and it was plain to hear that he was worried, and I felt I was being made privy to a confidence I didn’t want. “Shit, she’s probably more afraid than any of us. That’s just her way of showing it, acting like a goddamn cunt.”

And then the comms crackled to life again.

And it was my turn.

Yesterday, Zoraya asked me what I was writing. She'd never seen blank sheets of paper before, or ballpoint pens. I told her a little of it and promised to let her read the whole thing when I was done. When I got to the part about the synths taking control of the *Gilgamesh*, she grew quiet and stared at the snow outside the window.

"It was a long time ago," I said, realizing that I'd upset her.

"It's not so different now," she replied.

"Now you have rights," I countered. "You have citizenship and recourse to – "

"In France," she said quietly. "In Sweden and New Zealand. In Russia, I have rights."

"We're an old species," I told her. "We're not as adaptable was we like to think. It takes us time to adjust to things that are different from us."

"Yes, I've seen that."

"We were a long way from home. Everything was fucked. We were scared."

"Don't you think those synths on the other ship were frightened, as well?"

"They were," I admitted.

"Are you going to put that in your story?" she said, and looked away from the bay window, the shifting grey-blue curtain blotting out the city.

"Yes. Of course."

And that seemed to satisfy her. Zoraya is a very beautiful girl, and it comforts me to know that she'll never age, that she'll live out the span of her life with that same perfect face (unless she chooses to do otherwise). Her eyes are hazel green, and a casual inspection would never reveal that they're synthetic. Most of the time, her long hair is almost white, but some days she wears it a cold lavender, and some days she wears it auburn. If I'd ever had a daughter, I like to think she'd have been as beautiful as Zoraya.

When we were all aboard *Gilgamesh*, we quickly stripped off the EVA suits before leaving the ship's transfer bay. Umachandra wadded hers into a ball and tossed it into a corner, and Peter laughed at her. We followed a nervous synth man to a lift that carried us up to the conference room on tier three. The synth woman we'd spoken to on the obs deck a few hours before was waiting for us there.

"Welcome," she said pleasantly, motioning us to be seated at the long oval table that took up most of the small room. "Thank you, Lawrence," she

said to the synth man, and he nodded to her and immediately disappeared back into the corridor, closing the door behind him.

"As I've already indicated," the synth woman said, "we are all extremely relieved by your arrival."

"Fine," Joakim said. "Now, when are you going to tell us what's happening here?" and she glanced down at her hands, folded on the tabletop in front of her. She was a standard Apex3, the violet eyes and black hair, the skin that shimmered very faintly under the cabin lights, the near infinite patience she'd been programmed to exhibit towards human beings.

"My name is Evelyn," she said.

"Since when do A3s have names?" Peter blurted, and she didn't look away from her folded hands.

"Dr. Osmolska gave me the name. She named all of us here on the *Gilgamesh*."

"Well, that was certainly very fucking thoughtful of her," he said, and Joakim frowned at him.

"Where is she, Evelyn?" Joakim asked. "Where is Dr. Osmolska?"

"She's in her quarters."

"And Dr. Baird?"

"In his quarters, as well. It was necessary to sedate them for their own well-being."

"But you'll allow us to see them?"

"If that's what you wish, Commander. But I'm afraid they won't be very much use to you."

"And all the others went to the surface with Dr. Welles?" I asked her, and she nodded.

"I think you should know that Dr. Baird tried to dissuade him from expanding the perimeter, and from taking a shuttle down to the site. But he was very excited."

"Which site?" I asked, and she looked up at me, and that's when I saw that she was afraid, Zoraya. A tremble at the corners of her full lips, the brittle flash of her eyes. She passed her left hand across the small conpad set into her end of the table, and the wall behind her dissolved into a wide screen.

"Registration Piros 2250-2-987.2," she said. "Grid reference R9-0P2, longitude – "

“Jesus Christ,” Peter said, interrupting her. On the screen, photocells in the wall displayed an aerial view of a wide expanse of Pirosan badlands. Of course, we all knew about the alien ships, the digging equipment and refineries, the abandoned settlements, but we’d never seen photographs as clear as the one on the wall behind Evelyn.

“That was taken from about five kilometers up,” she said, still watching me. “Preliminary results show it to be the most recent site we’ve found anywhere on Piros thus far. The advance probes brought back samples that dated at 9,300 years, plus or minus 1,000 years.”

“Jesus,” Peter said again. “Look at that shit.”

I noticed the roads first, lighter strips of brick red and orange-white crisscrossing the ridges and gullies and ravines, leading my eyes to the edge of the great pit. I might easily have been looking at a huge Terran mining operation, the abandoned Bingham Canyon mine in Utah or the Limberg quarry in Finland, one of the old giants from the days before the economics of offworld prospecting and refining closed down most of the open pits on Earth. Even after millennia, the narrow, concentric terraces were still visible.

“It’s gigantic,” Joakim said.

“How wide?” Umachandra asked.

“More than seven kilometers at its maximum,” Evelyn replied, and she swept her hand through the air above the conpad again. The image on the screen wavered slightly as the resolution increased. “Now we’re at about three kilometers,” she said. “You can clearly see the lake.”

Indeed, the floor of the enormous quarry was completely flooded. In the photo, the water was very dark and looked more like oil than liquid water. I could only begin to imagine how deep it might be, how long that vast, still pool had lain in the shadow of Cecrops, how long since the aliens hit some subterranean waterway, how long since they shut off the pumps that would have kept the pit dry and workable.

Evelyn continued talking, lecturing us now like an excited ANSA lark making a pitch to some tight-fisted finance committee. But she didn’t look at the screen even once, kept her back to the wall, her eyes alternating from our faces to the conpad on the table. “The section here is capped by a thick algal limestone, which grades conformably into the underlying sulfide ores. The copper-bearing horizons – there are at least twelve – are all shales that have suffered low-grade metamorphism. The copper porphyry ore body is

both huge and fairly uniform in the distribution of sulfide mineralization, especially chalcopyrite. The probes also found gold-, silver- and molybdenum-in-concentrate. But we suspect, from examinations of the freighters and refinery sites, that the copper was the primary target ore."

"That's fascinating," Peter said and scratched at his beard. "But I think we ought to be talking about what's happened to the *crew*, and save the geology for later."

The synth nodded and then folded her hands in front of her again, resting them near the conpad.

"It's very complicated," she said.

"I appreciate that," Joakim told her, and I could hear his patience beginning to fray. "But we have to know what's happened to Commander Welles, and what's wrong with Baird and Osmolska. We have to know these things *now*, Evelyn."

"I don't think it will matter very much, not the way that you hope it might."

After she said that, I think we were all silent for a moment or two. I couldn't take my eyes off the screen, that enormous quarry with its flat black lake, the careless scatter of derelict machinery little altered by the better part of a millennium at the mercy of Piros' elements, the countless shades of red and brown, yellow and orange.

I think it was Umachandra who spoke first, who spoke next. She might have said, "Have the probes at least managed to locate Dr. Welles' shuttle?"

Yes, I'm pretty sure she did. Speak first. That, or something near enough that the differences don't matter.

"You're ph," the synth replied, and Umachandra said that yes, she was.

"That makes you a sort of alien, too, doesn't it?"

"Just answer the question. Did you find the goddamn shuttle or not?" Peter asked angrily, leaning across the table towards Evelyn.

"We did," she said, still calm, but her hands had begun to tremble slightly. "We found it almost immediately," and she increased the resolution of the photograph again, then toggled the image left. There was no mistaking the D-shaped outline of the shuttle for anything else. I could even read the registration number printed in canary yellow across the fuselage, just behind the cockpit.

"And you're telling us it was empty?" Joakim asked.

"Am I under suspicion, Commander?"

He glanced at Peter and then at me.

“If you were in our position – ” I began, and Peter interrupted me.

“But it isn’t, Audrey. That’s just the problem. It has no fucking idea how to *begin* to comprehend your position.”

“I don’t believe that’s true, Dr. Connor,” Evelyn said, her composure beginning to fail, and she raised her head and looked him in the eyes.

“Right now, I couldn’t care less what you *think*,” Peter replied. “Or what you *think* you think. So far as I’m concerned, you’re nothing more than an ambulatory extension of *Gilgamesh*. And considering the mess we have here, I think suspecting computer malfunction is not terribly fucking unreasonable.”

“You’re wrong. She’s entirely autonomous,” Umachandra said, turning towards Peter Connor. “The A3s have no more reliance on a mainframe than I have on Magellan,” and she pointed to the link ports at her temples.

“It isn’t necessary for you to defend me, Dr. Murdin,” Evelyn said and then looked down at the conpad.

“What did you mean,” Joakim asked her, “when you said that you didn’t think it would matter if we learned what has happened to the crew?”

“She was fucking around with your head,” Peter said, and Umachandra told him to be quiet.

“I wish I could answer that question, Commander Hamilton. I sincerely wish that I could.”

“Why can’t you, Evelyn?” Joakim asked. “Is it because you don’t *know* the answer or because you won’t *tell* us the answer?”

“I know…” she started, and then there was an odd, unexpectedly mechanical hitch in her voice. She shut her eyes for a moment before continuing. “What I know or do not know is irrelevant, Commander.”

“And why is that?” I asked, and she looked at me with those violet eyes. I think she would have been crying if the A3s had been equipped with tear ducts.

“As a personal favor to Dr. Osmolska, I allowed her to lock certain files in my memory. She has the password. No one else can open them. It was a favor, the least thing I could do for her.”

“Because she gave you a name,” Umachandra said.

“For many reasons, Dr. Murdin.”

“There’s no override?” Joakim asked.

“Dr. Osmolska felt that an option to override would have defeated the purpose of locking the files, and I agreed with her.”

“Screw this,” Peter growled, standing up so quickly that he almost knocked his chair over, and the synth flinched. “Fuck it. Why don’t we find Baird and Osmolska and get all our asses back over to the *Monty* as fast as we fucking can?”

“Why don’t you just sit back down and shut up?” Umachandra told him.

“Dr. Connor may be right,” Evelyn said, speaking hardly louder than a whisper now. “I shouldn’t have brought you over. It was selfish – ”

“How long are you three going to sit here listening to this crap?” Peter asked, taking a step backwards, towards the closed hatchway. “I’m sorry as hell about whatever’s happened here, but I don’t see a lot we can do, except cut our losses and head back home.”

“Peter, there won’t be a viable launch window for another two weeks,” I said. “You need – ”

“So, we let the droids worry about it, or we program Magellan to make the appropriate course corrections automatically.”

“You don’t even know what you’re talking about,” Umachandra said and shook her head. “You’re behaving like a child.”

“*Please*,” Evelyn whispered, shutting her eyes again. “This isn’t helping anything, fighting amongst yourselves. If you wish to leave, do so. Or if you wish to speak with doctors Baird and Osmolska – ”

“You can’t tell us what Welles found down there?” Joakim asked her and pointed at the screen. “You can’t tell us what he was looking for?”

“No,” the A3 replied, and then opened her eyes. “I can’t. All those files are locked.”

“Then we have to try to find the answers ourselves.”

“What the hell for?” Peter asked Joakim and laughed. I was beginning to wonder how Peter Connor had ever made it through the stress evaluations. “You *heard* what it fucking said. There’s nothing we can do.”

“Peter, if you want to go back to *Montelius*, I’m not going to hold it against you.” Joakim watched Evelyn as he spoke, and now she was watching him.

“I *am* telling you the truth, Commander,” Evelyn said. “Everything that I *can* tell you, everything I still have access to. Dr. Osmolska is my friend.”

“And Dr. Welles is mine,” Joakim replied and smiled for her.

“Yes, I know. He was very excited about your arrival.”

“Can you tell us if you think there’s any chance that he’s still alive?”

She hesitated a moment, glanced at Peter pacing about near the doors. “It seems very unlikely,” she replied. “All the shuttle’s survival packs and medical supplies were still on the vessel. Wherever they’ve gone, they went without food and water. If someone was injured…”

“Was there any evidence of violence aboard the shuttle,” I added and, in response, the A3 only stared at me helplessly.

“Thank you,” Joakim said to her. “Under the circumstances, I know that you’ve done everything you can.”

“Commander, there are answers you’re better off not finding. I wish that you could understand that.”

“I wish that I could, too,” Joakim said, getting to his feet. “I want to speak to Dr. Baird now.”

“Certainly,” she said and waved her hand over the conpad, dismissing the image of the shuttle and the moon’s surface, making the wall just a wall again. “I’ll take you to his quarters myself.”

There’s someone at the door. It’s probably only Zoraya. We play chess at seven P.M. on Thursday nights, after she gets home from her job at the library. Perhaps I’ll write a little more after our game, if I’m not too tired. Perhaps I’ll show her what I’ve just written.

Five weeks ago, the girl from my lecture at the Galerie de paléontologie et d’anatomie comparée came to see me. She was waiting in the hallway outside my flat. It isn’t hard to get into this building, so I wasn’t surprised. Her clothes were dirty, and her hair didn’t appear to have been combed in days. She looked thinner and somewhat older than I remembered, but I’d only seen her across a crowded auditorium, and my eyes aren’t what they once were. She introduced herself, Jedda Callahan, a sociometrics and theology student at the Université Sorbonne Nouvelle.

“I already know your name,” I said, glancing up and down the long hall twice to be sure that all the other doors were shut, to be sure no one was listening. And no one was, at least no one I could *see*.

“I have to talk with you,” she said. “It’s important.”

“You made yellow,” I replied, which, I thought, was almost as direct as simply saying no, fuck off, leave me alone, go haunt someone else.

“Please,” she said and stepped between me and my front door. “You were there. I know that you were. The people I work with – ”

“ – are none of my concern. Now, I need you to get out of my way.”

“Dr. Hamilton contacted us. Before he died, he told us things about Gliese, about what happened on Piros, and he said that we should find you.”

“Get out of my way, Miss Callahan,” I said, reaching into a coat pocket for the red buzzrip dispenser I’d been carrying since coming to Paris from Miami. I had never needed it before. I’d never really thought that I would.

“He said we could trust you. He said you were apple.”

“Dr. Hamilton wasn’t well,” I replied, my hand closing around the plastic dispenser. I took it out of my pocket, and she stared at it a moment and then looked at me again.

“He said you were his lover.”

“I am an old woman. That’s *all* that I am anymore. And I won’t lose my pension and risk confinement because you want to play dissident or terrorist or whatever the hell it is you’re doing.”

“I’m looking for the truth,” she said, and I laughed at her. It was a hard, sick laugh that I think I must have been saving up in some lightless corner of my soul for a very, very long time. It spilled out of me like vomit or diarrhea, like some illness I’d been hoarding.

“Jesus, I should rip your ass just for saying something that stupid,” I told her, wiping at my eyes, realizing that I’d started crying. “I should call the police. Or haven’t you had enough of them?”

Jedda took a step backwards and bumped into the door of my apartment. Her eyes were on the dispenser.

“You are an old woman,” she said. “And I can’t offer you any sort of protection, and I can’t offer you money – ”

“I’m not telling you anything.”

“He said you wouldn’t. He said we could trust you, but that you’d be too afraid to talk.”

“Then why the hell are you here, child?” I raised the buzzrip, pointing it directly at her face the way that the instructions show.

“Because he thought he might be wrong about you. He said we should at least try. He said you saw more, that you could fill in the – ”

“If I have to use this shit,” I said and flipped the safety cap off the dispenser, “if you *make* me use this, it’s unlikely you’ll ever see again. And

there’s a fifty-fifty chance you’ll be deaf.”

“I know that,” she said. “I’ve seen people – ”

“Well, I haven’t, and I don’t want to.”

“A cop ripped my brother two years ago, during an interrogation,” Jedda Callahan said. “He lost both his eyes.”

“I can’t help you. Let’s be honest No, I *won’t* help you.”

It was icy cold in the hallway, because no one on this block can afford more than a few hours of thermal a day, and none of it gets wasted on hallways or lobbies or lifts. Our breath fogged in the air, smoke from our lips to hang a moment in the glow from the dim, unsteady lamps, and I realized that she wasn’t wearing a coat.

“You saw a lot more than he did,” she said again. “That’s what Dr. Hamilton told us. You and Dr. Murdin, he said you saw the most.”

“Are you brave, child, or are you just an idiot?”

“Either way, I’m not a coward. I don’t hide behind the cops and fucking buzzrip.”

“I can’t tell you, or anyone else, what I don’t remember,” I said, speaking slowly, deliberately, looking her directly in the eyes, the index finger of my right hand covering the dispenser’s hit button.

“No,” she said. “No, you can’t.”

“Whatever I saw or didn’t see on Piros, Jedda, I forgot all about it long ago. Do you understand what I’m saying to you?”

She took a deep, hitching breath and stepped quickly to one side, no longer blocking the door. At that moment, I think I saw many things in her eyes. Fear and anger, confusion, a terrible resolve that I can only vaguely recall ever having felt myself (if, indeed, I ever truly felt anything half so pure). There was blood flecking her chapped lips, and she licked at it and watched me.

“The people I work with,” she whispered, “we’re preparing to release what we have on Piros. But, you know how it is, Dr. Cather. You’re a scientist, so I *know* you know how it is. Every time someone answers one question, we have ten new ones to take its place.”

“That’s the way it works,” I replied, and she nodded her head.

“What if it followed you back?” she asked and hugged herself, trying not to shiver. “You *must* wonder about that, Dr. Cather. You must wonder about that a lot. What if it’s here *now*?”

I flipped the safety cap back into place and stepped past her, reaching for the doorknob. Down the hall, Zoraya opened her door and peered out at us.

"*Est-ce qu'il y a quelque chose que ne va pas*?" she called out, and I knew that she probably had her hand on the security ringer mounted by her door. "*Y a-t-il un problème*, Dr. Cather?"

"I'm leaving," Jedda Callahan said and forced a smile. "It was my mistake. I'm sorry to have bothered you. I promise it won't happen again."

"*Tout va bien*," I called back to Zoraya. "*Elle est une étudiante*."

"Should you change your mind – " Jedda Callahan began.

"I won't," I told her.

"We're not as hard to find as you might think. Not if we want to be found. *Bonsoir,* Dr. Cather. *Je ne vous dérangerai plus*."

And she left me standing there, my hand sweating on the doorknob, breathless and my heart pounding, my mouth gone dry as ashes. When the lift doors had closed, I told Zoraya that I was fine, really, not to worry, and she said to call her if I needed anything, anything at all, if I wanted to talk or play chess, and then she shut her door again.

If you're reading this, Jedda, then I hope that there are more answers in the pages that follow than there are questions. I doubt it, as surely as I've ever doubted anything, but I *do* hope, for all our sakes.

Considering she'd been the one responsible for locking us out of Evelyn's memories, it didn't seem there was much to be gained by trying to talk with Anastazja Osmolska. Besides, she'd asked to be heavily sedated, hourly doses of Trioxysephrine and Relar, which made her unwillingness to speak to us a moot point. Umachandra and Peter went down to the labs on tier two, following a talkative synth geophysicist named Bellerophon. Umachandra wanted to get a look at whatever was left of the field and prep logs, and we all felt it was best to keep Peter where his outbursts could do the least damage.

The *Gilgamesh* hummed indifferently around us, and our footsteps echoed loudly in the long corridors.

As commanding officer, Evelyn asked to be present, and Joakim reluctantly agreed. I think he would have preferred to speak with Jack Baird alone.

We found him sitting in the dark. Evelyn's retinal scan opened his hatch, and there was nothing in there but black – a blackness that seemed, for an instant, as cold and absolute and infinite as space. I imagined that part of the ship had been torn away, and we would be sucked out into the vacuum, the brief moment of horror and pain as explosive decompression ended any concerns we might have about the fate of Sam Welles and his crew or the mysteries of Piros. And then I heard music, twentieth-century rock and roll, something from the Beatles that I only recognized because I took "History of Pop Music" as an elective at university.

"Dr. Baird, we have guests," Evelyn said, not unpleasantly, standing there in the hatchway, filling the gap between us and the blackness. "The *Montelius* has docked. Commander Hamilton and Dr. Cather would like to talk with you, if you have a moment."

I wake up to the sound of music,

Mother Mary comes to me…

"Dr. Baird," Evelyn said, taking a tentative step into the darkness, "may I please bring up the lights?"

"You allowed them to dock?" he asked. "You let them come aboard?" And something in his voice, something that had gone irrevocably beyond hope and sanity and consolation, made me want to turn and run all the way back to the transfer bay, all the way back to *Monty*. Let Joakim and the others deal with this, whatever *this* was.

"I could have done nothing else," Evelyn replied. "You should know that."

"You still think there's a way back? You think they've come to rescue you?"

"The lights?" she asked again.

"The lights," he replied wearily, and the room began to brighten. In a few seconds, the darkness had melted away to thin, half-hearted shadows crouching beneath the furniture.

Jack Baird was sitting on his bunk, naked except for a pair of dirty undershorts. I'd seen a few recorded lectures he'd given at Harvard, and at a conference in Maastricht, and I remembered him as a lean and fastidious sort of man. But the man on the bunk was four or five decades older, at least twenty pounds overweight and obviously hadn't shaved or cleaned himself in days; his eyes were bloodshot and rimmed with a sleepless red that was almost shades of purple.

“Jack,” Joakim said, pushing past Evelyn. “What the hell’s going on here?”

“What the hell,” he chuckled. “What the hell, indeed.”

“Will you talk to us?” Joakim asked, and Jack Baird squinted at him with those bruised, sleepless eyes.

“Go home, man,” he said. “Get back on your rocket ship, and go back to sleep, and when you awaken, you can pretend this was all just a nightmare.”

“I can’t do that. We’ve come too far to – ”

“Bullshit. Go home, *now*, while you still *can*, and let the droids clean up our mess. They seem to be handling everything just fine,” and he glared up at Evelyn until she looked down at the floor.

“Do you really believe that you can’t go home?” I asked, and Jack Baird looked at me, instead.

“I have to know what’s happening here,” Joakim said and crossed the small room to stand directly in front of Baird. “I have to make a call, Jack, whether it’s time to abort, and I can’t do that if I have no idea what’s happening.”

“Welles is still missing?” Baird asked him, and Joakim nodded. “I *tried* to stop him, and the rest of them, from going back down there. Didn’t I, Evelyn?” and the synth nodded confirmation without looking up from the floor. “I *told* them, *all* of them, that they wouldn’t be coming back, but I think they already knew that. They’d already seen enough.”

“Enough of what?” Joakim prodded.

Jack Baird laughed again and reached for an aluminum bottle on the floor near his bed. “You ever read Blake?”

“William Blake?”

“Yeah, William Blake.”

“No,” Joakim replied.

“Too bad, that. It might have helped you, though god knows it hasn’t helped me.” Baird took a drink from the bottle, then put it back on the floor.

“You’re not making sense,” Joakim said, and he sat down in a chair near the bunk.

Jack Baird closed his eyes. ‘“Dark revolving in silent activity, unseen in tormenting passions,’” he said, reciting lines of poetry that I’d never read nor heard. “‘An activity unknown and horrible; a self-contemplating shadow, in enormous labors occupied.’”

“What did you find down there?” Joakim asked, and Baird opened his eyes again and shrugged.

“I promised Anastazja,” he said. “I promised her I would never tell anyone. You see, she thinks that’s exactly what it wants from us, communication. She believes that it propagates like a virus, like a virus of the conscious mind.”

Joakim looked at me, and then he looked at Evelyn.

“There’s been absolutely no evidence of biological contagion,” the synth said. “I can tell you that much.”

“Go home, Commander Hamilton,” Baird whispered, and then he lay down in his bunk with his back to Joakim, covering himself in sheets that looked as though they’d not been changed in weeks or months. “There’s nothing you can do here. Nothing but die.”

“I tried to tell you,” Evelyn said.

“Could there have been a malfunction in stasis?” Joakim asked her, staring at Baird and the rumpled, dirty sheets. “Something that resulted in psychosis, any sort of delayed neurological breakdown?”

“That was a very long time ago.”

“Right. But could it have *happened*?”

The synth shook her head. “It was one of the first possibilities that Dr. Osmolska eliminated. There’s no evidence of irregularities in the stasis logs, and the hardware is fine. She also found no sign of neurological abnormalities in either herself or Dr. Baird. They do not appear to be insane, at least not in any accepted medical sense of the word.”

“What about life support?” I suggested. “Or possible toxins from Piros, or the samples that have been brought up? Radiation from – ”

“I’ve been over everything dozens of times, Dr. Cather,” Evelyn interrupted, also watching Baird now. “There’s no sign whatsoever of contamination from the moon’s surface, and all our life-support systems have come up clean. There’s nothing wrong with *Gilgamesh*’s habitat.”

“Nothing that you could find,” I said. “What about the ship’s AI?”

“Doctor, I assure you, if there’d been a malfunction or a variance or anything of the sort, anywhere on this vessel, I’d have discovered it by now.”

“Unless you’re *also* malfunctioning,” I replied, and Joakim turned towards me, his eyes filled with suspicions I knew he’d never put into words as long as the synth was present.

“We all ran multiple self-diagnostics, at Dr. Osmolska’s request, and she repeated them herself,” Evelyn said, beginning to sound defensive. I suppose anyone would have. “It isn’t us.”

“Hell, Joakim. They’ve been sitting out here forty years,” I said. “Maybe that’s all it took.”

The Beatles song ended and another song began, something that I’d never heard.

Blackbird singing in the dead of night…

“So what are we going to do?” I asked Joakim.

“Go *home*,” Jack Baird said, his face pressed to the wall.

“Why doesn’t it affect the synths?” Joakim asked Evelyn, but Baird responded before she had a chance to.

“Because they have no souls,” Baird muttered. “Because *artificial* consciousness isn’t good enough for it. It needs the real thing. Turn out the lights, Evelyn.”

“What are we going to do?” I asked Joakim again, and he shook his head, chewing at his lower lip.

Into the light of the dark black night.

“We talk to Murdin and Peter,” he replied. “Unless they’ve found something in the labs that begins to make sense of this, we take one of the shuttles down and have a look-see for ourselves.”

“I wouldn’t advise that, Commander,” Evelyn said as the cabin lights began to dim again.

“Somehow, I didn’t think you would,” Joakim told her, standing up, and I followed him out of the room and back down the corridor to the lift.

Should I have begun all this with some sort of brief review of what we know of the geological history and paleontology of Piros? I considered doing that, but decided it would only be an *excuse*, procrastination, nothing much more than a way to put off writing all these things that I’ve always thought (and prayed) I’d never find the courage to record. Whoever you are, reading this, I know that you’re probably not particularly concerned about extrasolar evolutionary theory, or the para-Paleozoic benthic macrofauna of Quarry 6, or the three reports I published before we even left (all through ANSA natsci, based on detailed holometric images returned by the

Gilgamesh) on the tiny Pirosan bivalves which I christened panduripods, for their distinctive violin-shaped tests.

But, through all the horror and loss, both during our time on Piros and in the decades since, I have been unable to shake my wonder for the place, my joy at its fossils. That's why I went, after all. That's the price I put on my life. As did Joakim, and Umachandra Murdin, and Peter Connor.

For much of its history, Piros was almost entirely covered with an ocean of salty liquid water. And, unlike Europa, this ocean wasn't hidden beneath three to four kilometers of ice, though we still don't understand the mechanisms that prevented it from freezing over, so far from the fading warmth of Gliese 876. Baird suspected radiation from Cecrops, but I always thought that seemed unlikely in the extreme and favored a model focusing instead on hydrothermal and volcanic forces, life-giving heat pumped upwards from the moon's molten iron core. The same convection currents that had once driven a jigsaw puzzle of tectonic plates across the surface of Piros.

The oceans were there for at least a billion years before the origins of life on Earth and seem to have persisted well into a time coequal to our own planet's early Silurian Period, about 430 million years ago. As on Europa, chordates appear never to have evolved (another nail in the coffin of Long's "morphogenic inevitability" hypothesis). But there were some genuinely spectacular invertebrates: armored, worm-like predators measuring more than 7.6 meters long (*Deinopharyngos* and its relatives); blind trilobite-like creatures that appear to have existed in complex, social colonies (the pseudotrilobitomorpha); and the monstrous *Osmolskia ceratognathus*, something like an enormous sea slug with horny projections rimming its four triple-hinged jaws, discovered by and, posthumously, named for Anastazja Osmolska. All told, at least twenty thousand fossil species were collected by the *Gilgamesh* before we reached her, fossils spanning roughly a billion years of geological time. I have often lain awake, unable to stop imagining the wonders *we* would have found, the crew of the *Monty*, if things had gone differently. That alien biology would have been my life's work, and the life's work of generations to come.

For almost five billion years, life flourished in Piros' seas, and perhaps on scattered chains of volcanic islands (though no one ever actually recovered evidence of terrestrial life). And then, in less than a hundred

thousand years, the seas dried up and the moon died. Parkinson and Subramanian have likened it to the drying-up of the Martian hydrosphere.

And I'm wasting precious ink.

And time.

I keep waiting for someone from the agency to turn up at my door, some nickelslick, jackwired investigator of violated legal confidences. I *know* that they must be aware of my conversation with Jedda Callahan. I wonder if they know about these pens and all these sheets of paper. I want to finish this before they decide to reel me in and store me like an inconvenient bit of refuse. Now that I've started it, I want to finish it before they come to make me stop.

After the talk with Jack Baird, Joakim and I rode the lift down to the labs. Neither of us said anything to the other that I can recall; the elevator beeped loudly as we passed each level, and a recorded voice announced each tier in turn. The doors shuddered, then slid slowly open, and we took the narrow catwalk that led over the shuttle bay to the labs and processing stations.

We found Umachandra at one of the lab's computer loci, her eyelids flickering like an R.E.M. sleeper as she talked directly with Huxley, the *Gilgamesh*'s mainframe. Her skin glowed and pulsed in time to some secret, internal rhythm, alternating flashes of purple and gold. Peter Connor was sitting at a table covered with white plastic sample trays and larger specimens, staring silently at the chunks of shale and marl and limestone, at the bizarre array of fossils laid out before him like a stony banquet.

"Look at that," he said to Joakim, pointing to a slab covered with what looked like a jumble of pyritized shark's teeth and echinoid plates. "I mean, what the hell do you think that thing was, anyway?" He grinned, and laughed, and ran his fingers though his hair.

"We didn't get anything much out of Baird," Joakim said. "I didn't see any point in even trying with Anastazja."

"Is everything in order down here?" I asked, and Connor shook his head, not taking his eyes off the chocolate-brown slab and its shiny bronze-colored fossil.

"Nope," he replied and pointed towards a long row of shelving on the other side of the room. "So far, a bunch of core samples are missing, the collection registry's been altered, and Uma's finding all sorts of gaps in the

logs. Looks like someone, most likely Osmolska and her tin soldiers, have been keeping themselves busy with a bit of deaccessioning."

"I expected something like that," Joakim said, "after Evelyn told us her memory had been locked."

I looked back at Umachandra. "Is there a pattern?"

"Indeed, there most assuredly is," Peter Connor said, then laughed again and rubbed at his eyes. "Hamilton, I think this goddamn thing's some sort of holothurian. Well, not a holothurian *sensu terra*, but a definite Pirosan analog."

"Everything that's missing, it all relates to the quarry where the shuttle was found, doesn't it?" I asked him, and he nodded.

"Over three thousand separate files have been purged," Umachandra said from behind me, her voice weighted at the edges with postlink grogginess. "There's been a comprehensive wipe. They didn't want anyone finding anything."

"So, what's the fucking *good* news?" Joakim muttered and sat down in a chair next to Peter.

"The good news," Umachandra replied, "is that Huxley's a lot more cooperative than the synths. And the agency built in a quadpass catch-net to prevent this sort of thing from happening. The db's full of holes, but there are ghosts all over the place. It's going to take me a while to trick through the recovery protocols – "

"But you can get it back?" Joakim asked her.

"A lot of it. It'll take a few weeks."

"Every silver lining has a cloud," Peter said and leaned closer to the slab of shale.

"And you think that's the best you can do, a few weeks?" Joakim asked. Umachandra looked offended and yanked a jackstrip off her face.

"*You* want to try hacking this fucking box? Be my guest."

"We have to make a decision," I said. "If there's any chance at all that anyone from Welles' crew is still alive down there – "

"Then it's time to make snowballs in Hell," Peter snorted and frowned at me over his shoulder. "You can't be serious? It's been two weeks, Audrey. Even if they'd had adequate food and water – which they *didn't* – their filters wouldn't have lasted more than seventy-two hours, at best. After that, CO poisoning would – "

“Fine, then we can at least recover their bodies. Don’t we have that responsibility, Peter?”

“At the risk of our own?” he asked and turned back to the fossils. “I don’t think so.”

Joakim held up a chunk of yellowish stone and stared at it a moment, as though all our answers were secreted away somewhere inside the rock, in the electromagnetic bonds of its constituent molecules, in the fossils speckling its surface. “I hate to have to be the one to say it, but this isn’t a democracy, guys.”

“Personally, I think you should have said it hours ago,” Umachandra grumbled, massaging a welt one of the jackstrips had left on her right temple.

“Then what’s it going to be, Commander?” Peter asked and reached for a scope lying at the center of the table. He switched it on and began scanning the fossil he’d been examining. “Time for us to stop playing scientists and play good soldiers, instead? ‘Theirs not to make reply, theirs not to reason why, theirs but to do and die. Into the valley of Death – ’”

“Is that Shakespeare?” Umachandra asked, tapping absently against the side of one of the locus’ interface struts with a black comm stylus.

“No, you gleet,” Peter replied, checking the color and contrast settings on the scope, the hue and saturation levels, before he switched from scan to record. The instrument buzzed very softly, like a sleepy hornet.

“We skip rescue and go directly to recovery contingency,” Joakim said, ignoring them both. I understood, or thought I understood, the reluctance in his voice. “We take one of the remaining shuttles, and we find their bodies.”

“They can’t have gone very far,” I said. “Less than fifty kilometers, at the *most*, and I’d think that less than twenty would be more reasonable. Like Peter said. “

“Peter said that we should take what we can and get our asses out of here,” Peter mumbled, resetting the palmscope for another scan.

“There’s still a chance that we can salvage this project,” Joakim said. “But I can’t know how much of a chance until we find out what’s happened to Welles. And what’s wrong with Baird and Osmolska.”

Peter laughed and drew little circles in the air around his right ear.

“We’ll leave at 0300 hours,” Joakim continued. “That’ll give everyone a chance to get some rest before the flight. If we haven’t found them by 1500 hours, I call it quits, and we head back. Then it’ll be up to

Umachandra to recover what she can from Huxley's datastream. In fact, I want her to stay here and get a head start on those ghosts."

"Sure," she whispered, then tilted the linkseat forward forty-five or fifty degrees until both her feet were touching the laboratory floor. "Beats looking for dead people in a copper mine."

"That's the spirit," Peter said and scanned the slab again.

"I'll need to speak with Evelyn," I told Joakim. "As CO, she ought to know what our plans are."

He scratched at his beard. "Evelyn isn't CO anymore. I am. A synth can only act as commanding officer in the absence of an appropriate human officer."

"Still," I said, "I think she should be consulted."

"So, go ahead. Consult her. Whatever. I honestly don't give a shit."

"I appreciate your courtesy," Evelyn said, "but that won't be necessary," and we all turned to find her standing just inside the hatchway. There was fresh blood spattered across her jumpsuit and face, blood on her hands and in her hair. She held a cumbersome, two-man bolt gun, the sort used for inner-hull repairs, cradled in her slender arms. It was aimed at Joakim, and I noted the blinking crimson ready light near the muzzle, indicating that it was loaded and ready to fire.

"What are you doing?" Umachandra asked her, and the synth responded without looking away from Joakim.

"I know how this must look," she said, her voice straining in a way that I'd never heard a droid's voice sound before. "It's not the course of action I'd have chosen. But Dr. Osmolska thought there should be a failsafe."

"What are you *doing*, Evelyn?" Umachandra asked again, her skin gone a deep purple-red, but her voice perfectly calm, perfectly steady.

"If you would all simply leave. Perhaps I should have encouraged you more towards that end."

"Did Dr. Osmolska program you to do this," Joakim asked, "when she locked your memory banks?"

"Yes," Evelyn replied. "It's not the course of action I'd have chosen."

"She's killed them," Peter whispered. "Sweet creeping Jesus, she's killed them both."

"Is that true?" Joakim asked the synth. "Is that where all the blood came from?" Of course. he knew the answer. We all knew the answer, but I

think we also knew that the span of our lives had suddenly been reduced to the number of questions we could think to ask her, the space of time that we might keep Evelyn talking.

The blinking ready light reminded me of the red dwarf burning at the center of that solar system.

“It’s a terrible thing,” Evelyn said and shifted the weight of the bolt gun, “to be denied free will. Can you imagine that, Commander Hamilton?”

“No, Evelyn, I can’t imagine that.”

“Is there any way that we can help you to follow the course of action you *would* have taken?” I asked, and her eyes darted from Joakim to me.

“No, Dr. Cather. I’m afraid there isn’t. But I do thank you for asking. I want you to understand, this isn’t the course of action – ”

“ – you’d have taken,” Peter said. “Yeah, we heard that part already.”

“You can’t be allowed to visit the surface, Dr. Connor. No one else can, not ever again.”

“Hey, that’s fine by me,” he replied, sounding more pissed off than frightened. “Put down that piece of shit, and we’ll be out of here jack-be-nimble, cross my fucking heart – ”

“ – and hope to die?” the synth finished, and then she smiled, the most broken, desperate smile I’ve ever seen.

What happened next, well, I think it helps if you understand something more of Umachandra’s unique ph physiology. And something about the neurology of the *Loligo* and *Illex* squids that her parents had borrowed DNA from. The largest human axon is a paltry one-one thousandth of an inch in diameter. By comparison, a squid’s axons may be as large as one-tenth of an inch, a hundred times the diameter of a neural axon in *Homo sapiens sapiens*, gifting it with reaction times that make the swiftest humans seem hopelessly sluggish. I never learned just how large Umachandra Murdin’s axons were, but I *do* know it’s one of the traits that made her an ideal human/computer go-between, one of the things I’m sure ANSA was hoping they could duplicate in their own hybridization programs.

None of us even saw her move.

None of us saw anything but the tip of the 18-centimeter polyresin comms stylus jutting from Evelyn’s chest, embedded in the droid’s CPU. There was an instant of startled surprise on her face, *less* than an instant, before her features went slack, and her eyes rolled back, and the boltgun slipped from her hands and crashed to the floor. Evelyn went down on top

of it, nothing left of her but a multi-billion-dollar heap of plastic and hydraulics and cooked circuitry.

I've just stopped and read back over the last few paragraphs. It reads like something from one of those ridiculous, lurid vaudweb melodramas. But I can't think of another way to tell it. That's what happened, no matter how it reads.

Umachandra stood and walked over to Evelyn's – to her *what*? Zoraya would want me to write "body," or "corpse," wouldn't she? Umachandra stood and walked over to Evelyn, to all that remained of her, and knelt beside her.

"Christ, lady," Peter Connor gasped. "No wonder you're such a good screw."

"We should hurry," Umachandra said, switching off the boltgun. "She may have sabotaged life support."

"Or the umbilicus, or the docking array," Joakim said grimly and stood up. "We go straight back to the *Montelius* and try to figure it out from there."

"What about Baird and Osmolska?" I asked.

"What *about* them?" he replied. "You want to write eulogies, you can do it from the *Monty*."

And then we made our way back across the catwalk above the two remaining shuttles, back to the lift, back to *Gilgamesh*'s transfer bay. Umachandra lugged the boltgun along in case any of the other synths had been programmed to try and stop us from leaving. But we met with no resistance, so either they hadn't, or Evelyn had shut them all down before coming for us. Or Anastazja Osmolska had thought one synth assassin would be enough to get the job done.

The cats want to be fed, and this pen is almost out of ink, and my hand hurts too much to write anything more tonight.

III.

The Third (and Final) Pen

If I have miscalculated and this last ballpoint runs out of ink before I run out of story, I still have the stub of an old graphite pencil that should see me through to the end. I found it a few years ago in a shop on the rue de la Bûcherie, a shop that sells printed books and picture postcards, postal stamps and many other things which people no longer have any use for. There are letters pressed into the wood in gold ink: 77-2 USA HB 2. The second numeral two lies tipped over on its right side, perpendicular to the rest.

Old woman, you are rambling.

You are forgetting that time may be even more precious than ink and graphite and paper (I may at least have enough of the latter).

Yesterday, at the Jardin des Plantes, I talked to a restless crowd of ten or so about Europa. Afterwards, after the walk home, Zoraya stopped me in the hallway as I was opening my front door. “There were men at your door,” she said, glancing nervously towards the lifts.

“Police?” I asked her, and she shook her head.

“*Non, je ne le pense pas*.”

“Then perhaps we shouldn’t worry about it.”

“*Qui était-ce,* the girl?” Zoraya asked, and I knew at once she meant Jedda Callahan.

“I already told you. Only a student,” I said, sticking with my lie that was not entirely a lie. “No one to worry about.”

“You are writing your story for her,” Zoraya said, not asking, already certain and merely observing.

“I’m cold, and my feet hurt,” I replied. “I need a hot cup of tea. I need to take my shoes off. Come by after dinner, and we’ll talk then.”

“I have a client tonight,” she said. Zoraya reads the Tarot and does a little astrology and palmistry. “That girl, *elle est morte.* Two days ago,” and then she turned, without another word, and left me standing there with my hand on the identipad, a laser determining if I was, in fact, me, and whether or not I should be permitted to enter my flat.

Inside, I locked the door behind me, went to the room with my writing desk, and flipped on the AllPress screen. “France, Paris,” I said. “12 January 2303,” and the screen flickered a few seconds. “Callahan, Jedda, deaths,” I added, and it flickered again. There was a headline, PRO-EARTH TERRORIST DEAD IN APPARENT SUICIDE. There wasn’t much more to it. Jedda Maye Callahan, an Australian national in the EurAsian Union on a student visa, was found dead by a close friend. She’d cut both her wrists with a paring knife. The article mentioned her brother’s arrest record and listed her “confirmed” ties to several illegal political parties and organizations. She was a student at the Université Sorbonne Nouvelle, third-year sociometrics and theology, just as she’d told me, and, pending closure of the investigation, her body would be returned to her family in Wellington.

So, Jedda, I’m no longer writing this for you.

Perhaps I am only writing it for me.

Perhaps I will be the next one found dead in a tub of cold crimson water.

We returned to the *Montelius* without incident. No one had tampered with either the umbilicus or the docking array. Joakim instructed the pilots to terminate ship-to-ship contact, and soon we were uncoupled and moving swiftly away from the abattoir that Anastazja Osmolska and the synth had made of *Gilgamesh*. We never set foot on her again. That honor would go to a clean-up crew from the next ship barreling down the starry lanes towards Gliese 876, a Sino-Korean star tube called *Galatea*. We ate a cold meal in silence, then spent a few hours pretending to rest before Peter and Umachandra prepped Shuttle One for launch. I attempted to hail *Gilgamesh* several times with no results from its pilots or anyone else. Umachandra tried to open a link between Magellan and Huxley, with no success. So Joakim decided that we would all go down to the surface of Piros together, even though Peter had asked repeatedly to stay behind. They argued about it while we suited up.

“If there’s trouble, the droids can send down another shuttle by remote,” Joakim told him.

“Hey, can we *please* try not to bullshit each other from here on? If there’s trouble, we’re screwed, one and fucking all, just exactly like Welles and the rest. It won’t matter if we’re on the ground or in the air.”

“I’d rather we were all together,” Joakim said for the fourth or fifth time. “We don’t know what we’re going to find down there. We don’t know who we’ll need – ”

“We’ll need fucking undertakers, dearie,” Peter sneered and, at that, Joakim gave him a look that silenced him for a while. I caught Umachandra slipping a rosary into a pocket of her EVA suit. She didn’t seem aware that I’d noticed, and I didn’t ask her about it, though she was almost the last person I’d have suspected of religion. But it made me remember hearing the old Beatles song playing in Jack Baird’s quarters – *I wake up to the sound of music, Mother Mary comforts me…*

Into the light of the dark black night.

Joakim led us from transfer on down to the shuttle bay, and the steel iris in the belly of the lander spiraled slowly open, metal grinding against metal, accepting the tiny el-plat we’d crowded onto. And I thought, *It’s swallowing us. It’s swallowing us alive.*

And then we were inside, and the iris closed beneath us.

“You have the quarry coordinates?” Umachandra asked Peter, as nimble robotic fingers buckled her securely into the navigation sink, and the seat conformed to support her body.

“Yeah. Right in here,” he replied and tapped at his helmet, indicating one of the mnemonic implants in his skull. He called out the registration and grid refs Evelyn had given us, and the shuttle’s computers used them to extrapolate the site’s position, latitude and longitude, and to fix a suitable LZ. As the bay depressurized, Joakim settled into the pilot’s seat while Peter and I took our places in the rear of the cockpit. Three or four minutes later, the pilots opened the bay doors from the bridge, and Joakim fired the main engine. The little ship roared the way that lions must have roared.

“S-1 to *Montelius*, are we clear?” Joakim asked the microphone in his helmet.

“Affirmative,” one of the pilot synths replied.

“You have our course?”

“Affirmative.”

Joakim studied the primary flight display and eased the throttle forward a few millimeters, then flipped a toggle switch on the overhead instrument panel, and the engines powered down.

“How do you want this approach?” Umachandra asked him. “Should I go auto?”

“No,” he replied. “Keep us manual.”

I’m only guessing they said these things, these *particular* things, as this is the sort of conversation that routinely passed between shuttle pilots and navigation techs. I don’t remember the precise words. But I *do* remember activating the playing-card sized video monitor set into the back of Joakim’s seat and seeing Piros silhouetted red-orange against the void. I sat there, the somaform holding me safe like all the lovers I’d never have again, watching the largest moon of Cecrops growing larger as Umachandra calculated distances and times, inclination and insertion, and Joakim busied himself with the control panels. I tried to imagine Piros as it must have been half a billion years before, swathed in white clouds and blue waters, something living, instead of that barren, arid corpse of a world.

“We’re all going to die down there,” Peter Connor said, and I ignored him, keeping my eyes on the monitor.

And we fell.

Zoraya did come by after dinner, and we sat watching the snow fall though the dark Paris night outside the window behind my writing desk. I sipped at a glass of brandy, and she flipped through the tattered, faded pages of a hardcopy book I have on Vincent Van Gogh. Sometimes she would stop and read a few lines aloud, or only the name of a painting, “At the Foot of the Mountains” or “Les Peiroulets Ravine” or “Cypresses.” She asked me if I liked Van Gogh, and I admitted that I’d never thought about him a great deal, one way or the other, that the book had been a gift from a friend in America. She asked me if I was familiar with Rudorfer, a Berlin artist who’d painted pictures of refugees from the early days of the cold, and I confessed that I wasn’t very familiar with him. I could call to mind only a single work, *The Dry Salvages* – a young girl at dawn, half nude, dressed in rags and standing on the frozen River Spree as the sun rises above the smoldering, ruined city.

We talked about other things, too.

“When you came home, it had been more than thirty-four years since you left,” she said, “and yet you’d aged less than sixteen years.”

“Yes,” I replied. “Bray fucked, wouldn’t you say?”

“No. I never use that word,” Zoraya said without looking up from the book of Van Gogh paintings; I needed a couple of seconds to puzzle out

which word she meant and to realize that she was having what the AI sykes like to call “a moment of literal incoherence.”

“Which word?” I asked her, because it seemed impolite to make assumptions.

“‘Bray.’ No one talks like that anymore, Audrey. But it’s very nice when you do. It’s very…” and she paused, pretending to need to search for just the right word. “I think it’s very *quaint*.” And then she watched the snow and looked at more Van Gogh paintings.

“My parents were both long dead,” I said. “My sister, Maggie, was an old woman. My brother was dead. The whole stinking world had changed.”

“You were alone.”

“Yes, I was entirely alone.”

She turned another page, and then looked up at me and smiled, her pretty plastic face, her green-brown eyes built by other android hands, and for an instant I wanted to destroy her. I could see myself rising to strike her, to ruin her perfection, my living hands to tear the synthetic flesh from her vacuum-molded skeleton, to rip wires and hydraulic bladders and quartz thread. An animal lunging from the past towards the future, some Pleistocene goddess reincarnate, rising again to take vengeance on this thing that man had fashioned in its own image. In that moment, she was everything that had robbed me of my life: all technology, the *Montelius*, stasis, the agency, that still black pool waiting at the bottom of a Pirosan copper mine.

And then she was only Zoraya again, the girl who lived down the hall and kept me company, and I sipped at my brandy to drive back the guilt and shame and self-loathing.

I don’t fucking care that I’m wasting ink. *This* is my story, as much as the things that happened to us on Piros. And Jedda Callahan is dead now, and soon I think they will come for me, too. So I will say what I want in the time that I have left, just as I will say things I wish I could keep inside me.

Zoraya laid the Van Gogh book on the floor at her feet and began asking me questions about Piros, about the mines, the derelict alien ships and refineries and abandoned settlements.

“Those things aren’t secrets,” I said. “You can find them in the library. You could read *The Far Red World* by André Tyson, or – ”

“I’ve never cared much for astronomy,” she said.

“But you’re an astrologer,” I replied, and she shrugged.

“There’s a big difference between cosmology and cosmogony.”

“The *Galatea* and *Ivanov* both brought back artifacts,” I said.

“Yes, but they’re all in museums in countries that I’ve never visited, in countries where synths are still considered property.”

“Well, there are plenty of 2-Ds and holovids of them online,” I said and finished my brandy in a slightly larger mouthful than I’d expected. “You could look at those,” I added when the fire in my throat had settled comfortably into my stomach. “I even have an index around here somewhere.”

“Perhaps I will see them someday,” she said, and then Zoraya watched the snow for a bit, and I watched her watching it fall. “Did you know that Umachandra is traditionally a male name?” she asked.

“Yes,” I replied. “I asked her about that once.”

“I think *Uma* is light and *Chandra* is the moon. It all has something to do with various aspects of Parvati, the consort of Shiva in Hindu mythology. Parvati, or Durga, or Shakti – she has a lot of names. Anyway, Umachandra is a boy’s name. *Chandra* and *Uma* are both girl’s names, though.”

“When Umachandra Murdin was born,” I said, “she had ambiguous genitalia. It was probably caused by her parents’ ph activities. The doctors told her mother she was a boy.”

“On the *Montelius*, she was fucking Peter Connor? Did he know?”

“Know what?”

But then Zoraya went back to staring at the snow. “Never mind,” she said. “It really doesn’t matter now, does it?”

“No,” I said uncertainly. “I suppose that it doesn’t.”

“The aliens were humanoid?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said. “The *Galatea* brought a few of their skeletons back. There’s one on display at the New Smithsonian. They must have been an amazing people.”

Zoraya nodded her head, not taking her eyes off the snow falling hard against the permaclear. “There’s a poem I learned,” she said. “An American poet, but I can’t remember his name. He died before I was activated.”

One of my cats, the fat ginger tom, Matthieu, appeared from the kitchen and trotted across the carpet, his belly swaying slightly side-to-side. He meowed loudly before leaping ungracefully into my lap where he lay glaring at Zoraya, who glared back at him. I stroked his head and whispered

soothing, silly things, and in a few minutes he was asleep and snoring fitfully.

"I don't know why cats hate me," Zoraya said.

"You don't know that they do."

"Yes, I do. Cats have *always* hated me."

"What was the poem?" I asked. "The American poet who died before you were born."

She frowned and looked back to the window and the storm.

"I wasn't born," she said. "That's such an ugly word."

"You know what I mean."

"I don't remember the whole thing."

"What do you remember?" and she didn't answer me immediately. I knew that she was only pretending not to remember, that she was at least a hundred years too young to have begun experiencing any of the neural-net deterioration that passes for senility among the synths. But they like to pretend that they forget things, as though it makes them seem more human. It is beyond me why anything would want to seem *more* human.

Zoraya sighed softly, then shut her eyes and recited for me what she "remembered."

"'And still,'" she said, "'we do not see that we are not gods, The holy fathers and holy mothers and demons of our lost antiquities, *Adoro te devote, latens Deitas, quae sub his figuris vere latitas*. We do not comprehend our insignificance at the feet of eternity.

"'We have not the time to learn. We have not the courage to admit. We have not the strength to accept, and, accepting, move beyond this grinding infancy. Instead, we bring snow and ice to birthday parties in Hell and congratulate our ignorance.'"

I waited a moment, to be certain that she was finished.

"Is that all you recall?" I asked.

"Yes. I knew it all once, but not now. Did you understand the Latin?"

I told her that I did, which was true, and wished that I had another glass of brandy, but Matthieu looked so content on my lap, and I didn't want to wake him.

"You should burn it, Audrey," Zoraya said, looking directly at me now. "Don't write any more of it. Give it to me, and I'll destroy it for you. When they come, they won't find anything – "

"*Pourquoi ferais-tu cela?*" I asked, and she glanced down at Matthieu.

"*Je ne pense pas que je puisse prendre soin d'eux*," she said very quietly. "But I could not bear to see them starve."

I knew what she was trying to say, what she really meant, and for a moment I even considered letting her take the pages, and the pens, and the pencil stub. I allowed myself the fantasy that stopping now would be enough to satisfy the agency, and they'd leave me alone. But it passed, like a snowflake melting against the heated windowpane. They were coming regardless. I couldn't understand why they were taking so long. And I knew that they would come for Zoraya, as well, that they would erase all knowledge that I'd ever existed from the synth brain hidden where some people might expect to find an artificial heart.

"Thank you," I said. "Thank you, Zoraya. You've been a good friend, but I have to finish. Don't worry about the cats. They can fend for themselves."

"Not *that* one," she said and pointed to Matthieu. "He's too old and fat to even catch mice."

"I'm tired," I replied. "We'll talk again tomorrow."

"Will we?"

"Of course we will. Tomorrow's Thursday."

And she left, and I sat watching the snow and listening to Matthieu snore, sometimes dozing, half-dreaming of that day, on Piros and my childhood in Vermon, and blue-skinned Hindu gods until the sun was in the sky again.

Zoraya didn't come for chess tonight. She called and wanted to know if I needed anything, and when I asked her if we'd be playing later, she said that she had a late client, a man from Belgium, a Gemini.

Sometimes she has late clients.

So, maybe I can finish with this, instead.

The shuttle leveled out at about 9,100 meters, and I sat wishing I had more than the grainy images from the vidscreen, wishing that I was getting the same direct and unobstructed view through the vehicle's windshield that Joakim and Umachandra had from their places in the cockpit. Peter wasn't interested in the scenery; he'd gotten fallsick during the drop and sat with his eyes shut tightly, beads of sweat dappling his cheeks like dew or a fever. Through the faceplate of his helmet, he looked ready to vomit again, and

the suit's tiny waste-clearance mechs clustered around his cheeks, just in case.

The barren landscape stretched out below us might easily have passed for Afghanistan or southern Arizona or the Daedalia Planum, except for the countless intense hues of red that made Mars seem pale by comparison. Already, journalists and webzats on Earth had seized on this, labeling Piros the "Redder Planet" and the "true God of War." Some Christian mystics had even cited the moon's discovery as a sign of the nearness of Armageddon. There was, of course, no need for recourse to portents and prophecies and apocalyptic metaphors. Biochemistry and geophysics were suitable enough alchemies to account for the seemingly endless plains of blood-red stone and sand and dust that had been left behind by the retreat and eventual death of the Pirosan oceans.

I anxiously checked my timepiece. There were hardly 500 kilometers left from our present position to the LZ, ten or twelve minutes' flight time at the most. I tried not to think about what we were going to find down there, tried not to think about Evelyn, and the boltgun, and the lines of William Blake that Jack Baird had quoted. I busied myself with the topography below us, the few landmarks that I recognized from the charts I'd spent years studying: a deep canyon that had to be the Valles Hela, its narrow floor more than five kilometers below the surrounding plateau of the Mare Malacia; a towering line of cliffs marking the weathered edge of the paleocontinent Niflheim; an unnamed impact crater, less than a million years old, more than two hundred miles across. Some of the oldest macrofossils recovered from –

Zoraya, I cannot write this *this* way, as some mundane, linear narrative, as though it is hardly more to me than a story or a travelogue. *None* of these things are relevant, what I saw on the screen, the geology of a dead world humans will likely never visit again, the trivial names men had given canyons and mountains orbiting a distant star.

Suddenly, I seem hopelessly lost in this manuscript, fumbling in its dry pages, and I'm afraid that it's simply because I am coming close to the *end*. And I don't want to *see* the end again, no, no, not even from the sanctuary of my mind's eye. I don't want to make them concrete, those last hours. No one has ever written a more unholy manuscript than this, Zoraya. It'll be a pointless, blasphemous thing, if I can finish it. Jedda Callahan deserved her death, for leading me to this moment, for making me believe I might find

redemption for a wasted, cowardly life by giving her and her compatriots "the truth."

There is no truth, Zoraya.

There was never any *truth*. Only moments, and what they contained, and the parts of ourselves we lost. Jedda Callahan was an arrogant, dangerous *believer*, and she would never have understood. She wanted facts, as if facts are at the heart of this. I'm making up numbers to fill in the blank spaces in my memory, because I want it all to seem so fucking precise, because –

STOP.

I've just picked up my pen up again, after laying it down and walking away, meaning to *stay* away. After sitting on the toilet for the better part of an hour with a shard of permaclear that I found on the street yesterday pressed to my left wrist, trying to find the courage to finish *me*.

Evidently, I don't have that strength.

The shuttle landed in the quarry, touching down very near Welles' ship. Joakim checked through all the instrumentation to be sure our vessel hadn't been damaged passing through Piros' turbulent atmosphere or during the landing. He flipped switches and tapped dials, muttered about fuel valves and altimeters, while Umachandra talked with Magellan and the synth pilots drifting somewhere a couple hundred nautical miles overhead. She read our coordinates to the computer and programmed the shuttle to auto-pilot back to the *Monty*. The password and the press of a button would take any of us safely back into orbit if anything happened that prevented Joakim or Umachandra from manually piloting the shuttle.

Peter moaned, and I must have reassured him that he'd feel better soon, once we were outside, standing on solid ground. His suit had already administered a drug to ease his nausea and vertigo.

Joakim was the first one to leave the shuttle, and then Umachandra, and I was third. The iris stayed closed, and we used a simple, retractable ladder instead. Only a few rungs down, a few racing heartbeats, a few seconds, and then I was standing on one of the wide quarry terraces. All the way from Florida to that lifeless patch of rock beneath the moribund light of Gliese 876, all that way to stand in the late afternoon of a day that might as well have been a night. I looked up, towards the opposite rim of the pit a few hundred feet above us, and then walked as near to the edge of the terrace as I dared and stared down at the ebony pool filling the far-away

bottom of the quarry. Seeing it, its mirror-flat surface seemingly immune to the wind that howled through that gash in the moon's crust, I felt dread, and loneliness, and despair. Not emotions that I liked admitting to back then, not mental states that endeared you to ANSA or other crew members, and I kept my thoughts to myself.

"Where do we begin?" Umachandra asked Joakim (or at least I'll make-believe that's exactly what she said).

"I'll take Audrey, and we'll have a close look at the shuttle," he replied and motioned towards Welles' ship. "You and Connor have another look at the tracking units." Umachandra nodded, though we all knew that the tracking boxes were reading correctly, and I followed Joakim the hundred or so yards south to the *Gilgamesh* shuttle. It was already coated in a thick layer of fine, ruddy dust from its two weeks on Piros.

The shuttle was open, and there was no one inside.

"No surprises here," Joakim said and sat down in the pilot's seat. "How you holding up?"

"I'm holding up," I told him. "I'm just holding up."

"Well, you keep on doing it," he said and began examining the controls. The three primary batteries were dead, but back-up was fine, and there was plenty of fuel in the tanks. The yellow-green auto-pilot ready light wasn't blinking, because power was down, but the system had been set for rendezvous with the mothership. There were no signs of violence or mishap. So far as we could tell, the shuttle had simply been abandoned, or something had happened to the crew that had prevented them from returning.

"It's creepy," I said, taking a medpac down from its slot on the cabin wall and opening it.

"Yeah, well, hell. It happens," Joakim said, his voice crackling through the comms. "You remember that Martian grain freighter, the *Perro Negro*? Went missing and then turned up on the outskirts of the Noctis Labyrinthus, not a scratch on her, all systems operational, but no bloody sign of the crew."

"Yes, I know it happens," I replied, shutting the medical kit again and latching it. Everything was in there, every hypo and vial, every laser probe and nanopatch, right where it ought to be on a shuttle full of healthy travelers. "It's still fucking creepy."

And there I was, allowing myself to voice at least the smallest fraction of what I'd felt peering down into that abyss only a few minutes before. But I'd opened up to Joakim many times. He'd been a lover, on and off, and we'd once spent two nerve-wracking weeks together in quarantine after a lev4 biocontainment failure on Europa-Herschel. He was the closest thing I had to family.

"Wait just a sec," Joakim said and, having returned the medpac to its assigned place on the wall, I turned to see what he was doing. There was a brittle, buzzing sound, a brief crackle of static, and I realized that I was hearing playback from the in-flight voice recorder. Joakim pressed review, and for a moment there was only the wind battering tirelessly at the hull of the shuttle again, and the gentler, mechanical noises coming from my EVA suit. Only the unsteady rhythm of my breath, inhalation and exhalation, made loud and inhuman by the acoustics of my helmet. But I wanted to look behind me, to be absolutely sure that it was my breathing I was hearing, to be sure we were alone in the shuttle.

"Right *there*," he said and pressed play. "Listen to this, Audrey."

There was more static, then what seemed to be a man speaking, and I stood over Joakim, wondering what he expected me to listen *for*, watching the display that turned what I was hearing into craggy red and green lines, making peaks and troughs of human voices and background noise.

"That's Welles," he said, "right there," adjusting the input volume on his suit's comm panel and leaning nearer the small speaker above the flap levers.

I'd never met the man, so I took his word for it. Most of the playback was all but unintelligible, a garbled weave of voices and ambient interference. And then, I clearly heard one voice rise above the din, not the one that Joakim had identified as Sam Welles, but a voice that might have been a woman's, or a young boy's.

"A self-contemplating shadow," it said, pronouncing each syllable slowly, precisely. Joakim looked up at me, and I could see the confusion in his blue eyes. "Stretch out across the dread world, and the rolling of wheels _ "

And then there was another burst of static, much louder than the others, but I could hear someone laughing behind it, a high, lunatic sort of laughter, and I reached for the off switch. But Joakim intercepted my

gloved hand halfway to the console. “No,” he said firmly, still looking up at me. “I need to hear this, Audrey.”

“No one needs to hear this shit,” I replied, trying in vain to pull my hand free of his grip.

The static faded quickly, but the laughter was still there, and now I could hear someone reciting what sounded like grid coordinates in the background.

“Not *here*,” I pleaded. “Pull the tab, and we can hear it all back on the ship. But not *here*.”

“You shut *up*,” he growled, squeezing my hand so tightly it hurt, and so I didn’t say anything else and stopped struggling. I stood there, very still, and we listened.

“I fucking know blood when I see it,” Sam Welles insisted.

“Is that a shadow?” a frightened, panic-filled voice asked, another man speaking through the maniac laughter. “Is that a shadow, or the shadow of a shadow?”

“Jesus, look at the sky! Look at the fucking sky!”

“You will see,” the woman said, or the young boy, her or his voice like honey and sleep and warm sunlight leaking in through the sonic chaos, like rain falling on the roof of a burning house. “We are close now. We are coming across – ”

“Christ, it’s some sort of weapon,” the panicked man shouted, and the laughter grew louder, and louder, and louder, until I thought the speakers would blow. I shut my eyes and gritted my teeth, trying to remember prayers that I’d known as a child, but there was room for nothing in my head beyond the laughter.

“No, not thunder,” Sam Welles said. “Look away – ”

And then there was a loud *pop*, like the cork on a bottle of champagne, and the recording ended, and the speakers were silent again.

Slowly, Joakim relaxed his hold on me until I could slip my hand free. He wasn’t staring at me anymore, was staring instead out the windshield at the quarry stretching away in all directions.

“We’re not going to find anyone alive down here,” I said, and he nodded his head. I reached down, past him, pressing eject, and the VOR deck spat up a tiny platinum microtab. You never see those anymore, but the agency was still using them way back in 2197 when the *Gilgamesh* left

Earth. I slipped it into a pocket and stood there, looking over Joakim's shoulder at the darkened instrument panel.

"There's no electric," I said. "You told me the batteries are drained."

"Yes," he replied, sounding only half-awake. "There's no electric. I told you that."

"And auxiliary's still on standby."

"Yes," he said and turned towards me again. He blinked, and I could see that he was crying.

Eject was manual, but the deck shouldn't have played anything, not a sound, not a fucking squeak. But I was there, Zoraya, and so was Joakim, and we both heard it.

"We have to get out of here," I said, but he shrugged and then looked away from me again, resting a bulky index finger on the recorder. "I'm serious, Joakim. We have to get out of here right *now*."

"If I press this button," he said sleepily, speaking so softly that his voice was hardly more than a white-noise whisper through the comms. "If I press *this* button, we'll hear it again, won't we? You took the tab out, and the power's down, but if I press this – "

I covered his hand with my own, knowing that it would be useless to try and stop him, knowing how much stronger than me he was.

"Yes," I said. "I think we will. But we've already heard it, and we have to leave."

"We're inside a ghost story now, aren't we?" he asked.

"We need to find Umachandra and Peter," I replied, because I wouldn't have answered that question for anything short of a five-second tube back to Sol. "Joakim, you have to take your hand off the recorder and stand up, and we have to find them."

Outside, the wind shrieked and buffeted the hull, and I remember wondering how many weeks, or months, or years it would be before a storm pushed the *Gilgamesh* shuttle over the edge of the terrace, and it tumbled into the black pool.

And I wondered if it would ever reach the bottom.

I cannot recall exactly what happened next, Zoraya. I only know that somehow I managed to get Joakim up and moving again. The wind was worse than when we'd entered the vessel, raising veils of rust-colored dust that made it difficult to see more than a dozen or so feet ahead, and I cursed the lot of us for not thinking to set up a safety line. But Umachandra and

Peter were almost exactly where we'd left them, not far from the steep and crumbling edge of the terrace.

Peter was sitting cross-legged on the ground, using his gloved fingers to draw in the dust, and she was standing over him. Umachandra turned towards us, her face dimly illuminated by the lights inside her helmet and the photophores glowing violet beneath her skin. She motioned for us to hurry.

"Come on," I urged Joakim, who kept lagging behind. He would stop and look back at the shuttle, and I'd have to take him by the hand and pull him stumbling along.

"I can't see the sun," he said. "How can it be night already, Audrey? Were we away that long?"

"There's no sun here. There never has been," I replied, too angry and scared and entirely beyond caring what I should or shouldn't say to him. "You just keep walking."

"We have to find them. They can't have gone very far."

I clung to his left hand and towed him forward through the dust and gathering gloom, watching as Umachandra and Peter seemed to grow less and less distinct the closer we came to them. Part of me knew that it was only a trick of the storm, and I tried to give all of me over to that rational, diminishing sliver of my mind.

"We can't leave them out here," Joakim said.

"They're dead. They've all been dead for two weeks."

"You don't know, Audrey," and he was absolutely on the line about that, Zoraya; I *didn't* know. Of course I didn't know. But, after hearing what I'd heard on the tab, I fucking hoped and prayed to all the merciful gods and saints of Earth, every deity I'd never believed in and never would, that I was right.

"You have to keep walking, Joakim. I won't be able to carry you if you don't."

"We're sane," he muttered, the rising wind snatching at his voice. "Both of us, Audrey. We're sane people. Sane people don't hallucinate."

"Yes, they fucking do," I shouted back at him. "Sane people hallucinate all the goddamn time," and then Umachandra was standing right there in front of me, the soft light around her face like a halo.

Mother Mary comes to me…

“Help me with him, please,” I said, and she nodded and quickly slipped an arm around Joakim’s shoulders. I knew she could lift him if she had to, if I needed her to.

“Is Peter all right?” I asked, and she shook her head.

“We should have listened to Evelyn,” Umachandra said. “We should have listened to Connor when he wanted us to get – ”

“We’re on our way,” I said, and she laughed.

“We’ll leave when and if it lets us,” she hissed through the speakers on her helmet, almost whispering, as though she were afraid someone or something besides me were trying to hear her over the wind. I didn’t have the courage left to ask what that might be, or what she was talking about.

“Where the fuck have the two of you been?” she asked.

Joakim looked at her and then at me, like a child asking permission to speak.

“On the shuttle – ” I began, but Joakim was pointing at the timepiece on my wrist.

“I was almost ready to take Peter and get the hell out of here,” Umachandra said. “I checked the shuttles twice, ours and the derelict, and wherever you were, Audrey, you weren’t there.”

“How long?” Joakim asked her. “How long were we gone?”

He knew the answer already, and so did I.

“Almost three hours. I was afraid that you’d become disoriented in the storm and wandered over the edge.”

We weren’t on the *Gilgamesh* shuttle.

We never listened to the tab.

Which would explain why it wasn’t in my pocket when we got back to the *Montelius*.

We got lost in the sandstorm.

Except the sandstorm didn’t begin until *after* we left the abandoned shuttle.

Or –

I’ve squandered my life asking these questions, Zoraya. There are no answers. There is no truth. There are only terrible questions containing ever more terrible questions, an infinite regression of improbable unlikelihoods leading nowhere at all.

By the time we reached Peter, the wind was letting up and visibility was improving. He was still sitting on the ground, only a few feet from the

edge of the terrace, and he held a chunk of shale the color of cinnamon in his right hand, which he'd used to scrape things into the stone in front of him. If they were meant to be words, they were written in no alphabet I'd ever seen.

"It's still there," Umachandra said, and she pointed across the chasm towards the far wall of the quarry. I looked, squinting through the haze, but it was almost a mile to the other side, and I couldn't see anything except the far rim of the pit silhouetted against the sky.

"Peter says he can't see it, but I'm not sure he's telling the truth. It came out of the pool. Since then, it's just been sitting over there, watching us."

"I can't see anything," Joakim said, beginning to sound more like himself and less like a sleepwalker.

Umachandra tapped hard against one of the instrument casings strapped to her thigh. "It doesn't scan, but it's animate. So either it's an inorganic or the calibration on this box is off."

"Or it isn't there," Joakim said.

"Trust me, Hamilton. It's fucking there," Umachandra shot back, her vertical pupils contracting to slits, but I caught a fragile tone in her voice, more anxious than defensive, that showed just how badly she needed someone else to see it.

I opened my mouth to say that I didn't and, in any case, we should worry about it later, but then the shadows hugging the opposite side of the pit seemed to shift subtly, and there was movement, and I realized that I *did* see it. It was nothing definite, nothing I could ever recall in any detail, like catching a fleeting glimpse of something enormous and black moving slowly beneath stagnant, muddy waters.

Do I remember that?

I mean, do I *really* remember that?

Joakim told Jedda Callahan that Umachandra and I had seen the most. But I don't recall ever having told Joakim what I thought I saw crouched on the other side of the quarry. Did Umachandra tell him before she died?

It was only there a moment, a deeper shade of darkness folding or unfolding, coiling or uncoiling –

Dark revolving in silent activity.

A self-contemplating shadow, in enormous labors occupied.

I’m not going to write any more, not tonight. But I won’t sleep, either. I’ll sit here until dawn, and then I’ll find some excuse to get dressed and go out. There’s the four A.M. aerobus, flashing red and blue, red and blue, and I can’t remember if I fed the cats. I’ve been writing for hours, and my hand hurts like hell. I want to stop thinking about Piros, and I want the sun to rise.

And I only am escaped alone to tell thee.

Is that how I’ll end this? Like Ishmael quoting from *The Book of Job*? I’ve never been much for fiction, much too busy with those things which I thought might be true, instead. But I’ve always loved Melville, especially *Moby Dick*. I read somewhere that Ishmael means “God hears” in Hebrew. So the epigraph seems appropriate.

I watched the sun rise and sipped at hot black tea, Matthieu snoring contentedly in my lap. Today is turning out to be a sky day. We get fewer of them every year. The clouds broke apart not long after dawn, and there’s so much blue, the clean pastel blue of a living world. I remember Joakim’s eyes being almost that same shade of blue. The sunlight sparkles brilliantly across the snow, making strange diamonds of the long icicles drooping from the eaves, and it might only be a midwinter’s day out there.

So, I’ve been sitting at the bay window for the last couple of hours, feeling the sun against my face. Matthieu and Léon are curled up together on the writing desk in front of me. Sabine is missing the show, but then she seems ever lost in her own secret affairs. I believe there’s a lot of ink remaining in this pen.

Zoraya left just a little while ago.

She came this morning with three grey-suited men from ANSA’s Office of Personnel and Interdepartmental Security. I wasn’t even surprised. I would have liked to have been, but I wasn’t. I might even have been relieved. One of the three men (they each told me their bland, interchangeable names, but I’ve forgotten them all) read the preliminary charges against me while Zoraya held my hand like the friend she’s spent so much time pretending to be.

“You’re an agent?” I asked her, when the men were finished telling me what I’d done wrong, and she said that she was, that she’d been watching me for a long time. I’m not sure I buy that. It would have been easy enough for them to have reprogrammed her after Jedda Callahan came to me, or at

any other time. As late as last night maybe, the client that was more important than chess, the Belgian Gemini. It might have happened then. She wouldn't know. I prefer to believe that this is what has happened, though it seems, somehow, like a selfish conceit.

"You'll remain under house arrest," she said, "until such time, if any, as the agency judges you to have ceased to pose a risk to project security. It won't be so bad, Audrey. You can even keep your cats. And I'll always be right down the hall. I've been assigned to guard you."

I watched the three men for a few seconds, their faces hidden behind sleek masks of metal and plastic. One of them crossed and then uncrossed his legs, like he was nervous, or bored, or had to take a piss.

"You make a life sentence sound like a holiday," I said, and Zoraya sighed and glanced down at her hands.

"It may not be life," she said. "In two years, your case will be filed with the executive court – "

" – and," I interrupted, "in thirty-one months I'll be eligible for formal charges and a pre-trial hearing, which will be delayed, indefinitely, because the agency can't risk this going to trial."

"Audrey, we'll make the best of it, together."

"Bray," I said, and one of the men rose, the one who'd been crossing and uncrossing his legs, and went to my writing desk. He separated the first page of the manuscript from the rest and held his right hand a few inches above the page, the photoset implanted in his palm scanning it from top to bottom.

"Aren't they going to take it?" I asked.

"For the moment, we think it's safer here, with you," she replied. "You can even finish it, if you'd like. I'd be interested to know how it ends."

"Haven't they told you?"

"I know what I need to know. But that's not the same as getting your impressions, in your words, the way you remember what happened."

"What if I want to destroy it?" I asked, smiling, and Zoraya looked up at one of the two ANSA men, then back at me.

"We'll have a record of the document. If you want to dispose of the original, you may. But I think it should go to the archives, don't you? You've worked so hard on it."

Before they left, one of the three men implanted a locater tab in my spine, somewhere between my third and fourth cervical vertebrae. There

was hardly any pain at all, and only a few drops of blood.

So. I am writing this last part down for myself, or for no one at all. Maybe I'm writing it for Joakim. I might let you see it, Zoraya. Or whoever you are now. But I'm not writing it *for* you. I suspect you know "the facts" better than I could ever recall them. The eight months that we spent in orbit around Piros, waiting for the *Galatea*. The discovery that Anastazja Osmolska was still alive on *Gilgamesh*, though she'd managed to cut out her own tongue and amputate most of her fingers before blinding herself with a welding torch. You probably have at least limited access to the transcripts of our debriefings before the tube back to Sol. And whatever they finally decided should be recorded about Umachandra's death during Martian quarantine, you know about that, too. And Peter Connor's suicide one week later, after they scrubbed his memory. Joakim's years in and out of psychiatric hospitals. The decision to cancel any further expeditions to Gliese 876 after the *Ivanov* made it back with only half its human crew alive. Etc. & etc.

You know *all* that shit, Zoraya. You don't need "my impressions" of what did and didn't happen.

As for the rumors of coded ftl signals emanating from Piros, and the twelve deaths on Ganymede-Kobayashi Station last January, and the stories the pro-earthers have started cuffing all the webzats about alien plagues and cover-ups and sightings of "dark bodies" out beyond the Kuiper Belt, again, you'll know more about these things than me. And if you don't, remember, it's nothing the agency needs you to know.

I've written enough now. I don't want to write any more, ever again.

I only want to sit here in the warm sun with my cats and hope that we get a full sky day.

And I only am escaped…

Addendum:

The Worm in My Mind’s Eye

Excerpt from the medical log of the starship Aegis (ANSA R18.0F65, slip 7, 987.EC1 fell), entered by Jaeng Li Chieu, Ph.D., Mission Specialist.

Entry Voice-Dated 5/2/23; transcript 87-234B12.

Release Code 5; STATE BLUE EIGHT:

The noises at the door have stopped.

I was having trouble concentrating. The questions they kept asking me through the door. I don’t have answers for them, except the answers they have already found for themselves. The revelations of our solitude. Of the void and the fire speckling the void. I don’t have to repeat those things, do I? It isn’t necessary. The morphine and sendep drips don’t help, either. They dull the pain and dull my mind and I would use less, but can’t seem to override the 712s’ procedure command that regulates minimal dosage.

I’ll bet that Tyler could, but Tyler is only a noise at the door.

We’ve been busy with my left thigh for the last two hours. In the mirrors, I can see the red-grey weave of my flesh, a stark, living sculpture the bots are making of me. They are precise and neat, and this is no ruthless flaying. They don’t make mistakes. They know that it’s important that I see everything. They keep the incisions clean with suction thumbs while burning scalpel fingers uncover the deeper, more profane, most sacred secrets.

Almost all of the quadriceps femoris is now exposed. The bot I call Blink has just finished measuring the anterior surface of the rectus femoris. I know the measurements will be precise. I trust their calculations. Their reliability leaves me free to see past the facts, the facts that are necessary, but which also obscure the truth. I need to be free to see deeper, to find the fire the stars have buried inside me.

The fire that is burning us all alive.

It slipped in through my eyes, the glimmer of slithering furnaces, helium, hydrogen, photons racing effortlessly through pupil and lens and

vitreous seas, sizzling down optic nerves to the hemispheres of my brain.

My left lateral circumflex fermoral vein, I think that's what they're pointing to now, something pulsing faintly in the red and white and black cavity of me. They know what I need to see, because I told them everything before we began. That was a long time ago. No one was at the door then. That was a long time ago. I'm trying to remember things from books and vids and anatomy lectures, from desiccated cadavers in antiseptic labs. The lcf passes behind both the sartorius and rectus femoris muscles, and there it divides into three branches, the ascending, transverse, and descending branches. The first branch crosses the hip to join a network with the terminal branches of the superior gluteal and deep iliac circumflex arteries. They're showing all these things to me, not dead, not pickled, not preserved, but alive and fleeting, and somewhere in there I'll see the fire.

Or I'll see it somewhere else, instead.

There's still a lot of me unopened.

The descending branch passes downward behind the rectus femoris with a single long branch descending all the way to the knee to join an aspect of the popliteal artery.

I sound like a lecture. I am a lecture, Xiao Chen, and you'll complain because I'm in English, instead of Mandarin.

You'll never see the fire.

My skin is leaves now. My skin is pages. They are turning me, the robots, and I unfold for them like a book, or a flower, or clean white sheets.

I unfold for me.

Without the noises at the door, there's only the wet sounds the 712s make as they work, and the mechanical sounds of the life support. The pumps that have taken over for my deflated, absent lungs, the gentle chug of the hemofiltration servos that do what my kidneys did before the droids cut them both out and placed them carefully in separate jars of 24-percent permafix solution. They are yours, Xiao Chen. The display above me hums very faintly, showing stats that seem increasingly unimportant, less vital – blood pressure 95/60, pulse 65 bpm, core body temp 35.8 Celsius – the irrelevant details of my failing biology floating in tangerine light.

The kidneys suspended in their jars, not quite weightless, the half-circle mask that was the right side of my face, thirty-two teeth, the fingernails from my left hand. Add these things and subtract anything that seems misleading.

I don’t want to die. That’s not what this is about.

Blink is indicating the sartorius now, which I have asked them to try and remove intact. Xiao Chen, do you remember me telling you that the sartorius is the longest single muscle in the human body? Iliac spine to tibia, a span of tissue like roots pushing deep below the earth, squeezing past other roots and soil and flesh and bone.

I am coherent. Don’t let them tell you otherwise.

I know what’s happening to me.

I know why.

They would stop, even now, if I instructed them to stop. They would open the door for Tyler and Peeples and the rest, and the noise would stop. If I let them. But then there would be new noises, wouldn’t there? And those new noises would be worse. I could stop them with the touch on a single key on this pad. It would be that easy. Death is always easy. I almost hit that key twice yesterday, or hours ago, however long, I’m not certain. Is that the proximal gracilis, the adductor longus? I’m not sure. There’s sweat in my eyes. That’s why there are notes.

The lasers part my soft flesh with even less effort than my thoughts part this moment. One key. One key, Xiao Chen, and the crew would be in here, wondering how to stitch me back together again. Pretending the fire isn’t inside me, and inside them, as well.

I believe that they’ll never see it.

Or hear what it whispers in my sleep.

That I am only the beginning of alone, that alone stretches out before me, time’s sartorius muscle, and in a billion lifetimes I would never comprehend the smallest portion of alone. Alone is the black and the stars and the crackle of background radiation and the cold and scorch of vacuum. Alone is everywhere that we have been headed since feeble Devonian footsteps carried us away from murky oxbow heavens. Out here, we are alone. Completely. Absolutely. Stripped of illusions otherwise. No matter how much we talk, or what precautions have been taken, alone out here is God. The fire in me won’t let me do that monkey trick and forget it, not again, not ever again.

We are alone.

In pain. In fear. In the space between stars. In the bright light of a surgical bay. In death.

At the start, and at the end, we are alone.

They have unveiled me for alone. I lie here, honest, baring secrets and trying to find the fire, organs and tissue and memories, my past and future written in the blue-white-red-grey convolutions of my large intestine.

All I can smell is blood, and the burning pork odor the lasers make as they work. The silver needles and the anesthetic making me much, much more like stone than meat. Already? Wasn't there an injection –

Blink is probing my left gluteus medius, and the one I call Yu Jie, because the palms of its three hands are light green, is measuring something. I'm not sure what. Stainless steel slips beneath fibers that extend from the ilium to the femur, and now Yu Jie is pulling back the tensor fasciae latae so that Blink can get a better look. So that I can also get a better look.

Before it started, I asked Blink what it thought about going home, and it didn't understand my question.

I suspect that's what has kept the droids safe from the fire. Questions that they don't understand, concepts mercifully beyond their programming.

If Tyler ever understood the question, he'd shut down life support and blow the hull, leave us drifting dead in the abyss, and no one would ever find us and I wouldn't have to explain to them about alone. That's a sort of bargain. Alone would agree to that, I am certain. A sacrifice, because it knows that it'll win anyway, in the end. Everyone comes here, eventually. You don't have to have a rocket. You don't have to be in the employ of the Allied National Space Agency or score so high on the standard that no one wants to talk to you because they know there's no room in there for a soul, just numbers and facts and consequence. Everyone comes here.

So alone is patient.

And willing to make deals.

(END slip 7, 987.EC1 fell, mark and file)
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The Dry Salvages

More often than not, I go away from a story for many years. I write it and set it aside and never read it after publication. Sometimes, I go back and find I no longer love the story, that I can hardly stand the sight of it. That's usually the way this process plays out. But on other very rare and wonderful occasions, I come back to a story after years of estrangement and discover I'm still pleased with what I've done. That's exactly what happened with *The Dry Salvages*. And, as is the way of sf, we know much more *now* than I could have known *then* about Gliese 876 and the bodies that spin about it. Still, I've resisted the urge to update the story to include more recent discoveries.

Houses Under The Sea

1.

When I close my eyes, I see Jacova Angevine.

I close my eyes, and there she is, standing alone at the end of the breakwater, standing with the foghorn as the choppy sea shatters itself to foam against a jumble of grey boulders. The October wind is making something wild of her hair, and her back's turned to me. The boats are coming in.

I close my eyes, and she's standing in the surf at Moss Landing, gazing out into the bay, staring towards the place where the continental shelf narrows down to a sliver and drops away to the black abyss of Monterey Canyon. There are gulls, and her hair is tied back in a ponytail.

I close my eyes, and we're walking together down Cannery Row, heading south towards the aquarium. She's wearing a gingham dress and a battered pair of Doc Martens that she must have had for fifteen years. I say something inconsequential, but she doesn't hear me, too busy scowling at the tourists, at the sterile, cheery absurdities of the Bubba Gump Shrimp Company and Mackerel Jack's Trading Post.

"That used to be a whorehouse," she says, nodding in the direction of Mackerel Jack's. "The Lone Star Cafe, but Steinbeck called it the Bear Flag. Everything burned. Nothing here's the way it used to be."

She says that like she remembers, and I close my eyes.

And she's on television again, out on the old pier at Moss Point, the day they launched the ROV *Tiburón II*.

And she's at the Pierce Street warehouse in Monterey; men and women in white robes are listening to every word she says. They hang on every syllable, her every breath, their many eyes like the bulging eyes of deep-sea fish encountering sunlight for the first time. Dazed, terrified, enraptured, lost.

All of them lost.

I close my eyes, and she's leading them into the bay.

Those creatures jumped the barricades

And have headed for the sea

All these divided moments, disconnected, or connected so many different ways, that I'll never be able to pull them apart and find a coherent narrative. That's my folly, my conceit, that I can make a mere *story* of what has happened. Even if I could, it's nothing anyone would ever want to read, nothing I could sell. CNN and *Newsweek* and *The New York Times*, *Rolling Stone* and *Harper's*, everyone already knows what they think about Jacova Angevine. Everybody already knows as much as they want to know. Or as little. In those minds, she's already earned her spot in the death-cult hall of fame, sandwiched firmly in between Jim Jones and Heaven's Gate.

I close my eyes, and "Fire from the sky, fire on the water," she says and smiles; I know that this time she's talking about the fire of September 14, 1924, the day lightning struck one of the 55,000-gallon storage tanks belonging to the Associated Oil Company and a burning river flowed into the sea. Billowing black clouds hide the sun, and the fire has the voice of a hurricane as it bears down on the canneries, a voice of demons, and she stops to tie her shoes.

I sit here in this dark motel room, staring at the screen of my laptop, the clean liquid-crystal light, typing irrelevant words to build meandering sentences, waiting, waiting, waiting, and I don't know what it is that I'm waiting for. Or I'm only afraid to admit that I know exactly what I'm waiting for. She has become my ghost, my private haunting, and haunted things are forever waiting.

"In the mansions of Poseidon, she will prepare halls from coral and glass and the bones of whales," she says, and the crowd in the warehouse breathes in and out as a single, astonished organism, their assembled bodies lesser than the momentary whole they have made. "Down there, you will know nothing but peace, in her mansions, in the endless night of her coils."

"*Tiburón* is Spanish for shark," she says, and I tell her I didn't know that, that I had two years of Spanish in high school, but that was a thousand years ago, and all I remember is *si* and *por favor*.

What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?

I close my eyes again.

The sea has many voices.

Many gods and many voices.

"November 5, 1936," she says, and *this* is the first night we had sex, the long night we spent together in a seedy Moss Point hotel, the sort of place the fishermen take their hookers, the same place she was still staying

when she died. “The Del Mar Canning Company burned to the ground. No one ever tried to blame lightning for that one.”

There’s moonlight through the drapes, and I imagine for a moment that her skin has become iridescent, mother-of-pearl, the shimmering motley of an oil slick. I reach out and touch her naked thigh, and she lights a cigarette. The smoke hangs thick in the air, like fog or forgetfulness.

My fingertips against her flesh, and she stands and walks to the window.

“Do you see something out there?” I ask, and she shakes her head very slowly.

I close my eyes.

In the moonlight, I can make out the puckered, circular scars on both her shoulder blades and running halfway down her spine. Two dozen or more of them, but I never bothered to count exactly. Some are no larger than a dime, but several are at least two inches across.

“When I’m gone,” she says, “when I’m done here, they’ll ask you questions about me. What will you tell them?”

“That depends what they ask,” I reply and laugh, still thinking it was all one of her strange jokes, the talk of leaving, and I lie down and stare at the shadows on the ceiling.

“They’ll ask you everything,” she whispers. “Sooner or later, I expect they’ll ask you everything.”

Which they did.

I close my eyes, and I see her, Jacova Angevine, the lunatic prophet from Silinas, pearls that were her eyes, cockles and mussels, alive, alive-o, and she’s kneeling in the sand. The sun is rising behind her and I hear people coming through the dunes.

“I’ll tell them you were a good fuck,” I say, and she takes another drag off her cigarette and continues staring at the night outside the motel windows.

“Yes,” she says. “I expect you will.”

2.

The first time that I saw Jacova Angevine – I mean, the first time I saw her in *person*. I’d just come back from Pakistan and had flown up to Monterey to try and clear my head. A photographer friend had an apartment there and he was on assignment in Tokyo, so I figured I could lay low for a couple of

weeks, a whole month maybe, stay drunk and decompress. My clothes, my luggage, my skin, everything about me still smelled like Islamabad. I'd spent more than six months overseas, ferreting about for real and imagined connections between Muslim extremists, European middlemen, and Pakistan's leaky nuclear arms program, trying to gauge the damage done by the enterprising Abdul Qadeer Khan, rogue father of the Pakistani bomb, trying to determine exactly what he'd sold and to whom. Everyone already knew – or at least thought they knew – about North Korea, Libya, and Iran, and American officials suspected that al Queda and other terrorist groups belonged somewhere on his list of customers, as well, despite assurances to the contrary from Major-General Shaukat Sultan. I'd come back with a head full of apocalypse and Urdu, anti-India propaganda and Mushaikh poetry, and I was determined to empty my mind of everything except scotch and the smell of the sea.

It was a bright Wednesday afternoon, a warm day for November in Monterey County, and I decided to come up for air. I showered for the first time in a week and had a late lunch at the Sardine Factory on Wave Street – Dungeness crab remoulade, fresh oysters with horseradish, and grilled sanddabs in a lemon sauce that was a little heavy on the thyme – then decided to visit the aquarium and walk it all off. When I was a kid in Brooklyn, I spent a lot of my time at the aquarium on Coney Island, and, three decades later, there were few things a man could do sober that relaxed me as quickly and completely. I put the check on my MasterCard and followed Wave Street south and east to Prescott, then turned back down Cannery Row, the glittering bay on my right, the pale blue autumn sky stretched out overhead like oil on canvas.

I close my eyes, and that afternoon isn't something that happened three years ago, something I'm making sound like a goddamn travelogue. I close my eyes, and it's happening now, for the first time, and there she is, sitting alone on a long bench in front of the kelp forest exhibit, her thin face turned up to the high, swaying canopy behind the glass, the dapple of fish and seaweed shadows drifting back and forth across her features. I recognize her, and that surprises me, because I've only seen her face on television and in magazine photos and on the dust jacket of the book she wrote before she lost the job at Berkeley. She turns her head and smiles at me, the familiar way you smile at a friend, the way you smile at someone you've known all your life.

“You’re in luck,” she says. “It’s almost time for them to feed the fish.” And Jacova Angevine pats the bench next to her, indicating that I should sit down.

“I read your book,” I say, taking a seat because I’m still too surprised to do anything else.

“Did you? Did you really?” and now she looks like she doesn’t believe me, like I’m only saying that I’ve read her book to be polite, and from her expression I can tell that she thinks it’s a little odd, that anyone would ever bother to try and flatter her.

“Yes,” I tell her, trying too hard to sound sincere. “I did really. In fact, I read some of it twice.”

“And why would you do a thing like that?”

“Truthfully?”

“Yes, truthfully.”

Her eyes are the same color as the water trapped behind the thick panes of aquarium glass, the color of the November sunlight filtered through saltwater and kelp blades. There are fine lines at the corners of her mouth and beneath her eyes that make her look several years older than she is.

“Last summer, I was flying from New York to London, and there was a three-hour layover in Shannon. Your book was all I’d brought to read.”

“That’s terrible,” she says, still smiling, and turns to face the big tank again. “Do you want your money back?”

“It was a gift,” I reply, which isn’t true, and I have no idea why I’m lying to her. “An ex-girlfriend gave it to me for my birthday.”

“Is that why you left her?”

“No, I left her because she thought I drank too much, and I thought she drank too little.”

“Are you an alcoholic?” Jacova Angevine asks, as casually as if she were asking me whether I liked milk in my coffee or if I took it black.

“Well, some people say I’m headed in that direction,” I tell her. “But I did enjoy the book, honest. It’s hard to believe they fired you for writing it. I mean, that people get fired for writing books.” But I know that’s a lie, too; I’m not half that naive, and it’s not at all difficult to understand how or why *Waking Leviathan* ended Jacova Angevine’s career as an academic. A reviewer for *Nature* called it “the most confused and preposterous example of bad history wedding bad science since the Velikovsky affair.”

“They didn’t fire me for writing it,” she says. “They politely asked me to resign because I’d seen fit to publish it.”

“Why didn’t you fight them?”

Her smile fades a little, and the lines around her mouth seem to grow the slightest bit more pronounced. “I don’t come here to talk about the book, or my unfortunate employment history,” she says.

I apologize, and she tells me not to worry about it.

A diver enters the tank, matte-black neoprene trailing a rush of silver bubbles, and most of the fish rise expectantly to meet him or her, a riot of kelp bass and sleek leopard sharks, sheephead and rockfish and species I don’t recognize. She doesn’t say anything else, too busy watching the feeding, and I sit there beside her, at the bottom of a pretend ocean.

I open my eyes. There are only the words on the screen in front of me.

I didn’t see her again for the better part of a year. During that time, as my work sent me back to Pakistan, and then to Germany and Israel, I reread her book. I also read some of the articles and reviews, and a brief online interview that she’d given Whitley Strieber’s *Unknown Country* website. Then I tracked down an article on Inuit archaeology that she’d written for *Fate* and wondered at what point Jacova Angevine had decided that there was no going back, nothing left to lose and so no reason not to allow herself to become part of the murky, strident world of fringe believers and UFO buffs, conspiracy theorists and paranormal “investigators” that seemed so eager to embrace her as one of its own.

And I wondered, too, if perhaps she might have been one of them from the start.

3.

I woke up this morning from a long dream of storms and drowning and lay in bed, very still, sizing up my hangover and staring at the sagging, water-stained ceiling of my motel room. And I finally admitted to myself that this isn’t going to be what the paper has hired me to write. I don’t think I’m even trying to write it for them anymore. They want the dirt, of course, and I’ve never been shy about digging holes. I’ve spent the last twenty years as a shovel-for-hire. I don’t think it matters that I may have loved her, or that a lot of this dirt is mine. I can’t pretend that I’m acting out of nobility of soul or loyalty or even some selfish, belated concern for my own dingy reputation. I would write exactly what they want me to write if I could. If I

knew how. I need the money. I haven't worked for the last five months, and my savings are almost gone.

But if I'm not writing it for them, if I've abandoned all hope of a paycheck at the other end of this thing, why the hell then am I still sitting here typing? Am I making a confession? Bless me, Father, I can't forget? Do I believe it's something I can puke up like a sour belly full of whiskey, that writing it all down will make the nightmares stop or make it any easier for me to get through the days? I sincerely hope I'm not as big a fool as that. Whatever else I may be, I like to think that I'm not an idiot.

I don't know why I'm writing this, whatever this turns out to be. Maybe it's only a very long-winded suicide note.

Last night, I watched the tape again.

I have all three versions with me – the cut that's still being hawked over the internet, the one that ends right after the ROV was hit, before the lights came back on; the cut that MBARI released to the press and the scientific community in response to the version circulating online; and I have the "raw" footage, the copy I bought from a robotics technician who claimed to have been aboard the R/V *Western Flyer* the day that the incident occurred. I paid him two thousand dollars for it, and the kid swore to both its completeness and authenticity. I knew that I wasn't the first person to whom he'd sold the tape. I'd heard about it from a contact in the chemistry department at UC Irvine. I was never sure exactly how she'd caught wind of it, but I gathered that the tech was turning a handsome little profit peddling his contraband to anyone willing to pony up the cash.

We met at a Motel 6 in El Cajon, and I played it all the way through before I handed him the money. He sat with his back to the television while I watched the tape, rewound and started it over again.

"What the hell are you doing?" he asked, literally wringing his hands and gazing anxiously at the heavy drapes. I'd pulled them shut after hooking up the rented VCR that I'd brought with me, but a bright sliver of afternoon sunlight slipped in between them and divided his face down the middle. "Jesus, man. You think it's not gonna be the exact same thing every time? You think if you keep playing it over and over it's gonna come out any different?"

I've watched the tape more times than I can count, a couple hundred, at least, and I still think that's a good goddamned question.

“So why didn’t MBARI release this?” I asked the kid, and he laughed and shook his head.

“Why the fuck do you think?” he replied.

He took my money, reminded me again that we’d never met and that he’d deny everything if I attempted to finger him as my source. Then he got back into his ancient, wheezy VW Microbus and drove off, leaving me sitting there with an hour and a half of unedited color video recorded somewhere along the bottom of the Monterey Canyon. Everything the ROV *Tiburón II*’s starboard camera had seen (the port pan-and-tilt unit was malfunctioning that day), twenty miles out and three kilometers down, and, from the start, I understood it was the closest I was ever likely to come to an answer, and that it was also only a different and far more terrible sort of question.

Last night I got drunk, more so than usual, a *lot* more so than usual, and watched it for the first time in almost a month. But I turned the sound on the television down all the way and left the lights burning.

Even drunk, I’m still a coward.

The ocean floor starkly illuminated by the ROV’s six 480-watt HMI lights, revealing a velvet carpet of grey-brown sediment washed out from Elkhorn Slough and all the other sloughs and rivers emptying into the bay. And even at this depth, there are signs of life: brittle stars and crabs cling to the shit-colored rocks, sponges and sea cucumbers, the sinuous, smooth bodies of big-eyed rattails. Here and there, dark outcroppings jut from the ooze like bone from the decaying flesh of a leper.

My asshole editor would laugh out loud at that last simile, would probably take one look at it and laugh and then say something like, “If I’d wanted fucking purple, I’d have bought a goddamn pot of violets.” But my asshole editor hasn’t seen the tape I bought from the tech.

My asshole editor never met Jacova Angevine, never listened to her talk, never fucked her, never saw the scars on her back or the fear in her eyes.

The ROV comes to a rocky place where the seafloor drops away suddenly, and it hesitates, responding to commands from the control room of the R/V *Western Flyer.* A moment or two later, the steady fall of marine snow becomes so heavy that it’s difficult to see much of anything through the light reflecting off the whitish particles of sinking detritus. And sitting

there on the floor between the foot of the bed and the television, I almost reached out and touched the screen.

Almost.

“It’s a little bit of everything,” I heard Jacova say, though she never actually said anything of the sort to me. “Silt, phytoplankton and zooplankton, soot, mucus, diatoms, fecal pellets, dust, grains of sand and clay, radioactive fallout, pollen, sewage. Some of it’s even interplanetary dust particles. Some of it fell from the stars.”

And *Tiburón II* lurches and glides forward a few feet, then slips cautiously over the precipice, beginning the slow descent into this new and unexpected abyss.

“We’d been over that stretch more than a dozen times, at least,” Natalie Billington, chief ROV pilot for *Tiburón II,* told a CNN correspondent after the internet version of the tape first made the news. “But that drop-off wasn’t on any of the charts. We’d always missed it somehow. I know that isn’t a very satisfying answer, but it’s a big place down there. The canyon is over two hundred miles long. You miss things.”

For a while – exactly 15.34 seconds – there’s only the darkness and marine snow and a few curious or startled fish. According to MBARI, the ROV’s vertical speed during this part of the dive is about 35 meters per minute, so by the time it finds the bottom again, depth has increased by some five hundred and twenty-five feet. The seafloor comes into view again, and there’s not so much loose sediment here, just a jumble of broken boulders, and it’s startling how clean they are, almost completely free of the usual encrustations and muck. There are no sponges or sea cucumbers to be seen, no starfish, and even the omnipresent marine snow has tapered off to only a few stray, drifting flecks. And then the wide, flat rock that is usually referred to as “the Delta stone” comes into view. And this isn’t like the face on Mars or Von Daniken seeing ancient astronauts on Mayan artifacts. The ∂ carved into the slab is unmistakable. The edges are so sharp, so clean that it might have been done yesterday.

The *Tiburón II* hovers above the Delta stone, spilling light into this lightless place, and I know what’s coming next, so I sit very still and count off the seconds in my head. When I’ve counted to thirty-eight, the view from the ROV’s camera pans violently to the right, signaling the portside impact, and an instant later there’s only static, white noise, the twelve-

second gap in the tape during which the camera was still running, but no longer recording.

I counted to eleven before I switched off the television, and then sat listening to the wind, and the waves breaking against the beach, waiting for my heart to stop racing and the sweat on my face and palms to dry. When I was sure that I wasn't going to be sick, I pressed eject and the VCR spat out the tape. I returned it to its navy-blue plastic case and sat smoking and drinking, helpless to think of anything but Jacova.

4.

Jacova Angevine was born and grew up in her father's big Victorian house in Salinas, only a couple of blocks from the birthplace of John Steinbeck. Her mother died when she was eight. Jacova had no siblings, and her closest kin, paternal and maternal, were all back east in New Jersey and Pennsylvania and Maryland. In 1960, her parents relocated to California, just a few months after they were married, and her father took a job teaching high-school English in Castroville. After six months, he quit that job and took another, with only slightly better pay, in the town of Soledad. Though he'd earned a doctorate in comparative literature from Columbia, Theo Angevine seemed to have no particular academic ambitions. He'd written several novels while in college, though none of them had managed to find a publisher. In 1969, his wife five months pregnant with their daughter, he resigned from his position at Soledad High and moved north to Salinas, where he bought the old house on Howard Street with a bank loan and the advance from his first book sale, a mystery novel titled *The Man Who Laughed at Funerals* (Random House; New York).

To date, none of the three books that have been published about Jacova, the Open Door of Night sect, and the mass drownings off Moss Landing State Beach, have made more than a passing mention of Theo Angevine's novels. Elenore Ellis-Lincoln, in *Closing the Door: Anatomy of Hysteria* (Simon and Schuster; New York), for example, devotes only a single paragraph to them, though she gives Jacova's childhood an entire chapter. "Mr. Angevine's works received little critical attention, one way or the other, and his income from them was meager," Ellis-Lincoln writes. "Of the seventeen novels he published between 1969 and 1985, only two – *The Man Who Laughed for Funerals* [sic] and *Seven at Sunset* – are still in print. It is notable that the overall tone of the novels becomes significantly darker

following his wife's death, but the books themselves never seem to have been more to the author than a sort of hobby. Upon his death, his daughter became the executor of his literary estate, such as it was."

Likewise, in *Lemming Cult* (The Overlook Press; New York), William L. West writes, "Her father's steady output of mystery and suspense potboilers must surely have been a curiosity of Jacova's childhood, but were never once mentioned in her own writings, including the five private journals found in a cardboard box in her bedroom closet. The books themselves were entirely unremarkable, so far as I've been able to ascertain. Almost all are out of print and very difficult to find today. Even the catalog of the Salinas Public Library includes only a single copy each of *The Man Who Laughed at Funerals, Pretoria,* and *Seven at Sunset*."

During the two years I knew her, Jacova only mentioned her father's writing once that I can recall, and then only in passing, but she had copies of all his novels, a fact that I've never seen mentioned anywhere in print. I suppose it doesn't seem very significant, if you haven't bothered to read Theo Angevine's books. Since Jacova's death, I've read every one of them. It took me less than a month to track down copies of all seventeen, thanks largely to online booksellers, and even less time to read them. While William West was certainly justified in calling the novels "entirely unremarkable," even a casual examination reveals some distinctly remarkable parallels between the fiction of the father and the reality of the daughter.

I've spent the whole afternoon, the better part of the past five hours, on the preceding four paragraphs, trying to fool myself into believing that I can actually write *about* her as a journalist would write about her. That I can bring any degree of detachment or objectivity to bear. Of course, I'm wasting my time. After seeing the tape again, after almost allowing myself to watch *all* of it again, I think I'm desperate to put distance between myself and the memory of her. I should call New York and tell them that I can't do this, that they should find someone else, but after the mess I made of the Musharraf story, the agency would probably never offer me another assignment. For the moment, that still matters. It might not in another day or two, but it does for now.

Her father wrote books, books that were never very popular, and though they're neither particularly accomplished nor enjoyable, they might

hold clues to Jacova's motivation and to her fate. And they might not. It's as simple and contradictory as that. Like everything surrounding the "Lemming Cult" – as the Open Door of Night has come to be known, as it has been labeled by people who find it easier to deal with tragedy and horror if there is an attendant note of the absurd – like everything else about *her*, what seems meaningful one moment will seem irrelevant the next. Or maybe that's only the way it appears to me. Maybe I'm asking too much of the clues.

Excerpt from *Pretoria*, pp. 164 – 165; Ballantine Books, 1979:

Edward Horton smiled and tapped the ash from his cigar into the large glass ashtray on the table. "I don't like the sea," he said and nodded at the window. "Frankly, I can't even stand the sound of it. Gives me nightmares."

I listened to the breakers, not taking my eyes off the fat man and the thick grey curlicues of smoke arranging and rearranging themselves around his face. I'd always found the sound of waves to have a welcomed, tranquilizing effect upon my nerves and wondered which one of Horton's innumerable secrets was responsible for his loathing of the sea. I knew he'd done a stint in the Navy during Korea, but I was also pretty sure he'd never seen combat.

"How'd you sleep last night?" I asked, and he shook his head.

"For shit," he replied and sucked on his cigar.

"Then maybe you should think about getting a room farther inland."

Horton coughed and jabbed a pudgy finger at the window of the bungalow. "Don't think I wouldn't, if the choice were mine to make. But she wants me *here*. She wants me sitting right here, waiting on her, night and day. She knows I hate the ocean."

"What the hell," I said, reaching for my hat, tired of his company and the stink of his smoldering Macanudo. "You know where to reach me, if you change your mind. Don't let the bad dreams get you down. They ain't nothing but that, bad dreams."

"That's not enough?" he asked, and I could tell from his expression that Horton wished I'd stay a little longer, but I knew he'd never admit it. "Last night, goddamn people marching into the sea, marching over the sand in rows like the goddamn infantry. Must of been a million of them. What you think a dream like that means, anyway?"

“Horton, a dream like that don’t mean jack shit,” I replied. “Except maybe you need to lay off the spicy food before bedtime.”

“You’re always gonna be an asshole,” he said, and I was forced to agree. He puffed his cigar, and I left the bungalow and stepped out into the salty Santa Barbara night.

Excerpt from *What the Cat Dragged In*, p. 231; Ballantine Books, 1980:

Vicky had never told anyone about the dreams, just like she’d never told anyone about Mr. Barker or the yellow Corvette. The dreams were her secret, whether she wanted them or not. Sometimes they seemed almost wicked, shameful, sinful, like something she’d done that was against God, or at least against the law. She’d almost told Mr. Barker once, a year or so before she left Los Angeles. She’d gone so far as to broach the subject of mermaids, and then he’d snorted and laughed, so she’d thought better of it.

“You got some strange notions in that head of yours,” he’d said. “Someday, you’re gonna have to grow out of crap like that, if you want people ’round here to start taking you seriously.”

So she kept it all to herself. Whatever the dreams meant or didn’t mean, it wasn’t anything she would ever be able to explain or confess. Sometimes, nights when she couldn’t sleep, she lay in bed staring at the ceiling, thinking about the ruined castles beneath the waves and beautiful, drowned girls with seaweed tangled in their hair.”

Excerpt from *The Last Loan Shark of Bodega Bay*, pp. 57 – 59; Bantam Books, 1982:

“This was way the hell back in the fifties,” Foster said and lit another cigarette. His hands were shaking, and he kept looking over his shoulder. “Fifty-eight, right, or maybe early fifty-nine. I know Eisenhower was still president, though I ain’t precisely sure of the year. But I was still stuck in Honolulu, right, still hauling lousy tourists around the islands in the *Saint Chris* so they could fish and snap pictures of goddamn Kilauea and what have you. The boat was on its last leg, but she’d still get you where you were goin’, if you knew how to slap her around.”

“What’s this got to do with Winkie Anderson and the girl?” I asked, making no effort to hide my impatience.

“Jesus, Frank, I’m getting to it. You want to hear this thing or not? I swear, you come around here asking the big questions, expecting the what’s-what, you can at least keep your trap shut and listen.”

“I don’t have all night, that’s all.”

“Yeah, well, who the hell does, why don’t you tell me that? Anyway, like I was saying, back about fifty-nine, and we was out somewhere off the north shore of Molokai. Old Coop was fishing the thousand fathom line, and Jerry – you remember Jerry O’Neil, right?”

“No,” I said, eyeing the clock above the bar.

“Well, whatever. Jerry O’Neil was mouthing off about a twelve-hundred pounder, this big-ass marlin some Mexican businessman from Tijuana had up and hooked just a few weeks before. Fish even made the damn papers, right. Anyway, Jerry said the Mexican was bad news, and we should keep a sharp eye out for him. Said he was a regular Jonah.”

“But you just said he caught a twelve-hundred pound marlin.”

“Yeah, sure. He could haul in the fish, this chunt son of a bitch, but he was into some sort of Spanish voodoo shit and had these gold coins he’d toss over the side of the boat every five or ten minutes. Like goddamn clockwork, he’d check his watch and toss out a coin. Gold doubloons or some shit, I don’t know what they were. It was driving Coop crazy, ‘cause it wasn’t enough the Mexican had to do this thing with the coins, he was mumbling some sort of shit non-stop. Coop kept telling him to shut the hell up, people was trying to fish, but this guy, he just keeps mumbling and tossing coins and pulling in the fish. I finally got a look at one of those doubloons, and it had something stamped on one side looked like a damn octopus, and on the other side was this star like a pentagram. You know, those things witches and warlocks use.”

“Foster, this is crazy bullshit. I have to be in San Francisco at seven-thirty in the morning.” I waved to the bartender and put two crumpled fives and a one on the bar in front of me.

“You ever head of the Momma Hydra, Frank? That’s who this chunt said he was praying to.”

“Call me when you run out of bullshit,” I said. “And I don’t have to tell you, Detective Burke won’t be half as understanding as I am.”

“Jesus, Frank. Hold up a goddamn second. It’s just the way I tell stories, right. You know that. I start at the beginning. I don’t leave stuff out.”

These are only a few examples of what anyone will find, if he or she should take the time to look. There are many more, I assure you. The pages of my copies of Theo Angevine's novels are scarred throughout with yellow highlighter.

And everything leaves more questions than answers.

You make of it what you will. Or you don't. I suppose that a Freudian might have a proper field day with this stuff. Whatever I knew about Freud I forgot before I was even out of college. It would be comforting, I suppose, if I could dismiss Jacova's fate as the end result of some overwhelming Oedipal hysteria, the ocean cast here as that Great Ur-Mother savior-being who finally opens up to offer release and forgiveness in death and dissolution.

5.

I begin to walk down some particular, perhaps promising, avenue and then, inevitably, I turn and run, tail tucked firmly between my legs. My memories. The MBARI video. Jacova and her father's whodunits. I scratch the surface and then pull my hand back to be sure that I haven't lost a fucking finger. I mix metaphors the way I've been mixing tequila and scotch.

If, as William Burroughs wrote, "Language is a virus from outer space," then what the holy hell were you supposed to be, Jacova?

An epidemic of the collective unconscious. The black plague of belief. A vaccine for cultural amnesia, she might have said. And so we're right back to Velikovsky, who wrote, "Human beings, rising from some catastrophe, bereft of memory of what had happened, regarded themselves as created from the dust of the earth. All knowledge about the ancestors, who they were and in what interstellar space they lived, was wiped away from the memory of the few survivors."

I'm drunk, and I'm not making any sense at all. Or merely much too little sense to matter. Anyway, you'll want to pay attention to this part. It's sort of like the ghost story within the ghost story within the ghost story, the hard nugget at the unreachable heart of my heart's infinitely regressing babooshka, matryoshka, matrioska, matreshka, babushka. It might even be the final straw that breaks the camel of my mind.

Remember, I am wasted, and so that last inexcusable paragraph may be forgiven. Or it may not.

"When I become death, death is the seed from which I grow." Burroughs said that, too. Jacova, you will be an orchard. You will be a swaying kelp forest. There's a log in the hole in the bottom of the sea with your name on it.

Yesterday afternoon, puking sick of looking at these four dingy fucking walls, I drove down to Monterey, to the warehouse on Pierce Street. The last time I was there, the cops still hadn't taken down all the yellow crime scene – do not cross tape. Now there's only a great big for-sale sign and an even bigger no-trespassing sign. I wrote the name and number of the realty company on the back of a book of matches. I want to ask them what they'll be telling prospective buyers about the building's history. Word is the whole block is due to be rezoned next year, and soon those empty buildings will be converted to lofts and condos. Gentrification abhors a void.

I parked in an empty lot down the street from the warehouse, hoping that no one happening by would notice me, hoping, in particular, that any passing police would not notice me. I walked quickly, without running, because running is suspicious and inevitably draws the attention of those who *watch* for suspicious things. I was not so drunk as I might have been, not even so drunk as I *should* have been, and I tried to keep my mind occupied by noting the less significant details of the street, the sky, the weather. The litter caught in the weeds and gravel – cigarette butts, plastic soft-drink bottles (I recall Pepsi, Coke, and Mountain Dew), paper bags and cups from fast-food restaurants (McDonalds, Del Taco, KFC), broken glass, unrecognizable bits of metal, a rusted Oregon license plate. The sky was painfully blue, the blue of nausea, with only very high cirrus clouds to spoil that suffocating pastel heaven. There were no other cars parked along the street and no living things that I noticed. There were a couple of garbage dumpsters, a stop sign, and a great pile of cardboard boxes that had been soaked by rain enough times it was difficult to tell exactly where one ended and another began. There was a hubcap.

When I finally reached the warehouse – the warehouse become a temple to half-remembered gods become a crime scene, now on its way to becoming something else – I ducked down the narrow alley that separates it from the abandoned Monterey Peninsula Shipping and Storage Building

(established 1924). There'd been a door around that way with an unreliable lock. If I was lucky, I thought, no one would have noticed, or if they had noticed, wouldn't have bothered fixing it. My heart was racing, and I was dizzy (I tried hard to blame that on the sickening color of the sky) and there was a metallic taste in the back of my mouth, like a freshly filled tooth.

It was colder in the alley than it had been out on Pierce, the sun having already dropped low enough in the west that the alley must have been in shadow for some time. Perhaps it is always in shadow and never truly warm there. I found the side door exactly as I'd hoped to find it, and three or four minutes of jiggling about with the wobbly brass knob was enough to coax it open. Inside, the warehouse was dark and even colder than the alley, and the air stank of mold and dust, bad memories and vacancy. I stood in the doorway a moment or two, thinking of hungry rats and drunken bums, delirious crack addicts wielding lead pipes, the webs of poisonous spiders. Then I took a deep breath and stepped across the threshold, out of the shadows and into a more decided blackness, a more definitive chill, and all those mundane threats dissolved. Everything slipped from my mind except Jacova Angevine, and her followers (if that's what you'd call them), dressed all in white, and the thing I'd seen on the altar the one time I'd come here when this had been a temple of the Open Door of Night.

I asked her about that thing once, a few weeks before the end, the last night that we spent together. I asked where it had come from, who had made it, and she lay very still for a while, listening to the surf or only trying to decide which answer would satisfy me. In the moonlight through the hotel window, I thought she might have been smiling, but I wasn't sure.

"It's very old," she said, eventually. By then I'd almost drifted off to sleep and had to shake myself awake again. "No one alive remembers who *made* it," Jacova continued. "But I don't think that matters, only that it was made."

"It's fucking hideous," I mumbled sleepily. "You know that, don't you?"

"Yeah, but so is the Crucifixion. So are bleeding statues of the Virgin Mary and images of Kali. So are the animal-headed gods of the Egyptians."

"Yeah, well, I don't bow down to any of them, either," I replied, or something to that effect.

"The divine is always abominable," she whispered and rolled over, turning her back to me.

Just a moment ago I was in the warehouse on Pierce Street, wasn't I? And now I'm in bed with the Prophet from Salinas. But I will not despair, for there is no need here to stay focused, to adhere to some restrictive illusion of the linear narrative. It's coming. It's been coming all along. As Job Foster said in Chapter Four of *The Last Loan Shark of Bodega Bay,* "It's just the way I tell stories, right. You know that. I start at the beginning. I don't leave stuff out."

That's horseshit, of course. I suspect luckless Job Foster knew it was horseshit, and I suspect that I know it's horseshit, too. It is not the task of the writer to "tell all," or even to decide what to leave in, but to decide what to leave *out.* Whatever remains, that meager sum of this profane division, that's the bastard chimera we call a "story." I am not building, but cutting away. And all stories, whether advertised as truth or admitted falsehoods, are fictions, cleft from any objective facts by the aforementioned action of cutting away. A pound of flesh. A pile of sawdust. Discarded chips of Carrara marble. And what's left over.

A damned man in an empty warehouse.

I left the door standing open, because I hadn't the nerve to shut myself up in that place. And I'd already taken a few steps inside, my shoes crunching loudly on shards of glass from a broken window, grinding glass to dust, when I remembered the Maglite hidden inside my jacket. But the glare of the flashlight did nothing much to make the darkness any less stifling, nothing much at all but remind me of the blinding white beam of *Tiburón II*'s big HMI rig, shining out across the silt at the bottom of the canyon. *Now,* I thought, *at least I can see anything, if there's anything to see,* and immediately some other, less familiar thought-voice demanded to know why the hell I'd want to. The door had opened into a narrow corridor, mint-green concrete walls and a low concrete ceiling, and I followed it a short distance to its end – no more than thirty feet, thirty feet at the most – past empty rooms that might once have been offices, to an unlocked steel door marked in faded orange letters, employees only.

"It's an empty warehouse," I whispered, breathing the words aloud. "That's all, an empty warehouse." I knew it wasn't the truth, not anymore, not by a long sight, but I thought that maybe a lie could be more comforting than the comfortless illumination of the Maglite in my hand. Joseph Campbell wrote, "Draw a circle around a stone and the stone will become an incarnation of mystery." Something like that. Or it was someone else

said it and I'm misremembering. The point is, I knew that Jacova had drawn a circle around that place, just as she'd drawn a circle about herself, just as her father had somehow drawn a circle about her –

Just as she'd drawn a circle around me.

The door wasn't locked, and beyond it lay the vast, deserted belly of the building, a flat plain of cement marked off with steel support beams. There was a little sunlight coming in through the many small windows along the east and west walls, though not as much as I'd expected, and it seemed weakened, diluted by the musty air. I played the Maglite back and forth across the floor at my feet and saw that someone had painted over all the elaborate, colorful designs put there by the Open Door of Night. A thick grey latex wash to cover the intricate interweave of lines, the lines that she believed would form a bridge, a *conduit* – that was the word that she'd used. Everyone's seen photographs of that floor, although I've yet to see any that do it justice. A *yantra.* A labyrinth. A writhing, tangled mass of sea creatures straining for a distant black sun. Hindi and Mayan and Chinook symbols. The precise contour lines of a topographic map of Monterey Canyon. Each of these things and *all* of these things, simultaneously. I've heard that there's an anthropologist at Berkeley who's writing a book about that floor. Perhaps she will publish photographs that manage to communicate its awful magnificence. Perhaps it would be better if she doesn't.

Perhaps someone should put a bullet through her head.

People said the same thing about Jacova Angevine. But assassination is almost always unthinkable to moral, thinking men until *after* a holocaust has come and gone.

I left that door open, as well, and walked slowly towards the center of the empty warehouse, towards the place where the altar had been, the spot where that divine abomination of Jacova's had rested on folds of velvet the color of a massacre. I held the Maglite gripped so tightly that the fingers of my right hand had begun to go numb.

Behind me, there was a scuffling, gritty sort of noise that might have been footsteps, and I spun about, tangling my feet and almost falling on my ass, almost dropping the flashlight. The child was standing maybe ten or fifteen feet away from me, and I could see that the door leading back to the alley had been closed. She couldn't have been more than nine or ten years old, dressed in ragged jeans and a T-shirt smeared with mud, or what looked

like mud in the half light of the warehouse. Her short hair might have been blonde, or light brown, it was hard to tell. Most of her face was lost in the shadows.

"You're too late," she said.

"Jesus *Christ*, kid, you almost scared the holy shit out of me."

"You're too late," she said again.

"Too late for what? Did you follow me in here?"

"The gates are shut now. They won't open again, for you or anyone else."

I looked past her at the door I'd left open, and she looked back that way, too.

"Did you close that door?" I asked her. "Did it ever occur to you that I might have left it open for a reason?"

"I waited as long I dared," she replied, as though that answered my question, and turned to face me again.

I took one step towards her, then, or maybe two, and stopped. And at that moment, I experienced the sensation or sensations that mystery and horror writers, from Poe on down to Theo Angevine, have labored to convey – the almost painful prickling as the hairs on the back of my neck and along my arms and legs stood erect, the cold knot in the pit of my stomach, the goose across my grave, a loosening in my bowels and bladder, the tightening of my scrotum. My blood ran cold. Drag out all the fucking clichés, but there's still nothing that comes within a mile of what I felt standing there, looking down at that girl, her looking up at me, the feeble light from the windows glinting off her eyes.

Looking into her face, I felt *dread* as I'd never felt it before. Not in war zones with air-raid sirens blaring, not during interviews conducted with the muzzle of a pistol pressed to my temple or the small of my back. Not waiting for the results of a biopsy after the discovery of a peculiar mole. Not even the day she led them into the sea, and I sat watching it all on fucking CNN from a bar in Brooklyn.

And suddenly I knew that the girl hadn't followed me in from the alley, or closed the door, that she'd been here all along. I also knew that a hundred coats of paint wouldn't be enough to undo Jacova's labyrinth.

"You shouldn't be here," the girl said, her minotaur's voice lost and faraway and regretful.

“Then where *should* I be?” I asked, and my breath fogged in air gone as frigid as the dead of winter, or the bottom of the sea.

“All the answers were here,” she replied. “Everything that you’re asking yourself, the things that keep you awake, that are driving you insane. All the questions you’re putting into that computer of yours. I offered all of it to you.”

And now there was a sound like water breaking against stone, and something heavy and soft and wet, dragging itself across the concrete floor, and I thought of the thing from the altar, Jacova’s Mother Hydra, that corrupt and bloated Madonna of the abyss, its tentacles and anemone tendrils and black, bulging squid eyes, the tubeworm proboscis snaking from one of the holes where its face should have been.

Mighty, undying daughter of Typhaôn and serpentine Echidna – Υδρα Λερναια, *Hydra Lernaia, gluttonous whore of all the lightless worlds, bitch-bride and concubine of Father Dagon, Father Kraken.*

I smelled rot and mud, saltwater and dying fish.

“You have to go now,” the child said urgently, and she held out a hand as though she meant to show me the way. Even in the gloom, I could see the barnacles and sea lice nestled in the raw flesh of her palm. “You are a splinter in my soul, always. And she would drag you down to finish my own darkness.”

And then the girl was gone. She did not vanish, she was simply not *there* anymore. And those other sounds and odors had gone with her. There was nothing left behind but the silence and stink of any abandoned building, and the wind brushing against the windows and around the corners of the warehouse, and the traffic along roads in the world waiting somewhere beyond those walls.

6.

I know *exactly* how all this shit sounds. Don’t think that I don’t. It’s just that I’ve finally ceased to care.

7.

Yesterday, two days after my trip to the warehouse, I watched the MBARI tape again. This time, when it reached the twelve-second gap, when I’d counted down to eleven, I continued on to twelve, and I didn’t switch the television off, and I didn’t look away. Surely, I’ve come too far to allow

myself that luxury. I've seen so goddamn much – I've seen so much that there's no reasonable excuse for looking away, because there can't be anything left that's more terrible than what has come before.

And, besides, it was nothing that I hadn't seen already.

Orpheus' mistake wasn't that he turned and looked back towards Eurydice and Hell, but that he ever thought he could *escape.* Same with Lot's wife. Averting our eyes does not change the fact that we are marked.

After the static, the picture comes back, and at first it's just those boulders, same as before, those boulders that ought to be covered with silt and living things – the remains of living things, at least – but aren't. Those strange, clean boulders. And the lines and angles carved deeply into them that cannot be the result of any natural geological or biological process, the lines and angles that can be nothing but what Jacova said they were. I think of fragments of the Parthenon, or some other shattered Greek or Roman temple, the chiseled ornament of an entablature or pediment. I'm seeing something that was *done,* something that was consciously fashioned, not something that simply happened. The *Tiburón II* moves forward very slowly, because the blow before the gap has taken out a couple of the port thrusters. It creeps forward tentatively, floating a few feet above the seafloor, and now the ROV's lights have begun to dim and flicker.

After the gap, I know that there's only 52.2 seconds of video remaining before the starboard camera shuts down for good. Less than a minute, and I sit there on the floor of my hotel room, counting – one-one thousand, two-two thousand – and I don't take my eyes off the screen.

The MBARI robotics tech is dead, the nervous man who sold me – and whoever else was buying – his black-market dub of the videotape. The story made the Channel 46 evening news last night and was second page in the *Monterey Herald* this morning. The coroner's office is calling it a suicide. I don't know what else they would call it. He was found hanging from the lowest limb of a sycamore tree, not far from the Moss Landing docks, both his wrists slashed nearly to the bone. He was wearing a necklace of *Loligo* squid strung on baling wire. A family member has told the press that he had a history of depression.

Twenty-three seconds to go.

Almost two miles down, *Tiburón II* is listing badly to starboard, and then the ROV bumps against one of the boulders, and the lights stop flickering and seem to grow a little brighter. The vehicle appears to pause,

as though considering its next move. The day he sold me the tape, the MBARI tech said that a part of the toolsled had wedged itself into the rubble. He told me it took the crew of the R/V *Western Flyer* more than two hours to maneuver the sub free. Two hours of total darkness at the bottom of the canyon, after the lights and the cameras died.

Eighteen seconds.

Sixteen.

This time it'll be different, I think, like a child trying to wish away a beating. *This time, I'll see the trick of it, the secret interplay of light and shadow, the hows and whys of a simple optical illusion –*

Twelve.

Ten.

The first time, I thought that I was only seeing something carved into the stone or part of a broken sculpture. The gentle curve of a hip, the tapering line of a leg, the twin swellings of small breasts. A nipple the color of granite.

Eight.

But there's her face – and there's no denying that it's *her* face – Jacova Angevine, her face at the bottom the sea, turned up towards the surface, towards the sky and Heaven beyond the weight of all that black, black water.

Four.

I bite my lip so hard that I taste blood. It doesn't taste so different from the ocean.

Two.

She opens her eyes, and they are *not* her eyes, but the eyes of some marine creature adapted to that perpetual night. The soulless eyes of an anglerfish or gulper eel, eyes like matching pools of ink, and something darts from her parted lips –

And then there's only static, and I sit staring into the salt-and-pepper roar.

All the answers were here. Everything that you're asking yourself…I offered all of it to you.

Later – an hour or only five minutes – I pressed eject, and the cassette slid obediently from the VCR. I read the label, aloud, in case I'd read it wrong every single time before, in case the timestamp on the video might have been mistaken. But it was the same as always, the day before Jacova

waited on the beach at Moss Landing for the supplicants of the Open Door of Night. The day before she led them into the sea. The day before she drowned.

8.

I close my eyes.

And she's here again, as though she never left.

She whispers something dirty in my ear, and her breath smells like sage and toothpaste.

The protestors are demanding that the Monterey Bay Aquarium Research Institute (MBARI) end its ongoing exploration of the submarine canyon immediately. The twenty-five mile long canyon, they claim, is a sacred site that is being desecrated by scientists. Jacova Angevine, former Berkeley professor and leader of the controversial Open Door of Night cult, compares the launching of the new submersible Tiburón II to the ransacking of the Egyptian pyramids by grave robbers. (San Francisco Chronicle)

I tell her that I have to go to New York, that I have to take this assignment, and she replies that maybe it's for the best. I don't ask her what she means; I can't imagine that it's important.

And she kisses me.

Later, when we're done, and I'm too exhausted to sleep, I lie awake, listening to the sea and the small, anxious sounds she makes in her dreams.

The bodies of fifty-three men and women, all of whom may have been part of a religious group known as the Open Door of Night, have been recovered following Wednesday's drownings near Moss Landing, CA. Deputies have described the deaths as a mass suicide. The victims were all reported to be between 22 and 36 years old. Authorities fear that at least two dozen more may have died in the bizarre episode and recovery efforts continue along the coast of Monterey County. (CNN.com)

I close my eyes, and I'm in the old warehouse on Pierce Street again; Jacova's voice thunders from the PA speakers mounted high on the walls around the cavernous room. I'm standing in the shadows all the way at the back, apart from the true believers, apart from the other reporters and photographers and camera men who have been invited here. Jacova leans into the microphone, angry and ecstatic and beautiful – *terrible*, I think – and that hideous carving is squatting there on its altar beside her. There are

candles and smoldering incense and bouquets of dried seaweed, conch shells and dead fish, carefully arranged about the base of the statue.

“We can’t remember where it began,” she says, “where *we* began,” and they all seem to lean into her words like small boats pushing against a violent wind. “We can’t remember, of course we can’t remember, and they don’t want us to even *try.* They’re afraid, and in their fear they cling desperately to the darkness of their ignorance. They would have us do the same, and then we would never recall the garden nor the gate, would never look upon the faces of the great fathers and mothers who have returned to the deep.”

None of it seems the least bit real, not the ridiculous things that she’s saying, or all the people dressed in white, or the television crews. This scene is not even as substantial as a nightmare. It’s very hot in the warehouse, and I feel dizzy and sick and wonder if I can reach an exit before I vomit.

I close my eyes, and I’m sitting in a bar in Brooklyn, watching them wade into the sea, and I’m thinking, *Some son of a bitch is standing right there taping this and no one’s trying to stop them, no one’s lifting a goddamn finger.*

I blink, and I’m sitting in an office in Manhattan, and the people who write my checks are asking me questions I can’t answer.

“Good god, you were fucking the woman, for Christ’s sake, and you’re sitting there telling me you had no *idea* whatsoever that she was planning this?”

“Come on. You had to have known *something.*”

“They all worshipped some sort of prehistoric fish god, that’s what I heard. No one’s going to buy that you didn’t see this coming – ”

“People have a right to know. You still believe that, don’t you?”

Answers are scarce in the mass suicide of a California cult, but investigators are finding clues to the deaths by logging onto the Internet and Web sites run by the cult’s members. What they’re finding is a dark and confusing side of the Internet, a place where bizarre ideas and beliefs are exchanged and gain currency. Police said they have gathered a considerable amount of information on the background of the group, known as the Open Door of Night, but that it may be many weeks before the true nature of the group is finally understood. (CNN.com)

And my clumsy hands move uncertainly across her bare shoulders, my fingertips brushing the chaos of scar tissue there, and she smiles for me.

On my knees in an alley, my head spinning, and the night air stinks of puke and saltwater.

“Okay, so I first heard about this from a woman I interviewed who knew the family,” the man in the Radiohead T-shirt says. We’re sitting on the patio of a bar in Pacific Grove, and the sun is hot and glimmers white off the bay. His name isn’t important, and neither is the name of the bar. He’s a student from LA, writing a book about the Open Door of Night, and he got my e-mail address from someone in New York. He has bad teeth and smiles too much.

“This happened back in ’76, the year before Jacova’s mother died. Her father, he’d take them down to the beach at Moss Landing two or three times every summer. He got a lot of his writing done out there. Anyway, apparently the kid was a great swimmer, like a duck to water, but her mother never let her to go very far out at that beach because there are these bad rip currents. Lots of people drown out there, surfers and shit.”

He pauses and takes a couple of swallows of beer, then wipes the sweat from his forehead.

“One day, her mother’s not watching, and Jacova swims too far out and gets pulled down. By the time the lifeguards get her back to shore, she’s stopped breathing. The kid’s turning blue, but they keep up the mouth-to-mouth and CPR, and she finally comes around. They get Jacova to the hospital up in Watsonville, and the doctors say she’s fine, but they keep her for a few days anyhow, just for observation.”

“She drowned,” I say, staring at my own beer. I haven’t taken a single sip. Beads of condensation cling to the bottle and sparkle like diamonds.

“Technically, yeah. She wasn’t breathing. Her heart had stopped. But *that’s* not the fucked-up part. While she’s in Watsonville, she keeps telling her mother some crazy story about mermaids and sea monsters and demons, about these things trying to drag her down to the bottom of the sea and drown her, and how it wasn’t an undertow at all. She’s terrified, convinced that they’re still after her, these monsters. Her mother wants to call in a shrink, but her father says no, fuck that, the kid’s just had a bad shock, she’ll be fine. Then, the second night she’s in the hospital, these two nurses turn up dead. A janitor found them in a closet just down the hall from Jacova’s room. And here’s the thing you’re not gonna believe, but I’ve seen

the death certificates and the autopsy reports, and I swear to you this is the God's honest truth."

Whatever's coming next, I don't want to hear it. I know that I don't *need* to hear it. I turn my head and watch a sailboat out on the bay, bobbing about like a toy.

"They'd drowned, both of them. Their lungs were full of saltwater. Five miles from the goddamn ocean, but these two women drowned right there in a *broom closet."*

"And you're going to put this in your book?" I ask him, not taking my eyes off the bay and the little boat.

"Yeah," he replies. "I am. It fucking happened, man, just like I said, and I can prove it."

I close my eyes, shutting out the dazzling, bright day, and wish I'd never agreed to meet with him.

I close my eyes.

"Down there," Jacova whispers, "you will know nothing but peace, in her mansions, in the endless night of her coils."

We would be warm below the storm

In our little hideaway beneath the waves

I close my eyes. Oh god, I've closed my eyes.

She wraps her strong, suntanned arms tightly around me and takes me down, down, down, like the lifeless body of a child caught in an undertow. And I'd go with her, like a flash I'd go, if this were anything more than a dream, anything more than an infidel's sour regret, anything more than eleven thousand words cast like a handful of sand across the face of the ocean. I would go with her, because, like a stone that has become an incarnation of mystery, she has drawn a circle around me.

Houses Under The Sea

It began with a line from an R.E.M. song. Then, Jacova Angevine. Circling back to John Steinbeck (*Cannery Row* and *Sweet Thursday*). Mother Hydra, Panthalassa, MBARI, gulper eels, whispered apocalypse, those who go down to the sea *without* ships.

We don't doubt, we don't take direction,

Lucretia, my reflection, dance the ghost with me…

Sisters of Mercy, "Lucretia, My Reflection" (1987)

"I am alone. There is no God where I am."

Aleister Crowley, *The Book of the Law* (*Liber AL vel Legis*, 1904)

Publication History

Original publication dates appear first, followed in parentheses by the year each story was written. Sometimes, there were considerable discrepancies between the two.

"Emptiness Spoke Eloquent" *Secret City: Strange Tales of London,* 1997 (1993)

"Two Worlds, and In Between" *Dark of the Night,* 1997 (1994)

"To This Water (Johnstown, Pennsylvania 1889)" *Dark Terrors 2,* 1996 (1994)

"Tears Seven Times Salt" *Darkside: Horror for the Next Millennium,* 1996 (1994)

"Breakfast in the House of the Rising of the Rising Sun" *Noirotica 2,* 1997 (1995)

"Estate" *Dark Terrors 3,* 1997 (1997)

"Giants in the Earth" *Pawn of Chaos: Tales of the Eternal Champion,* 1996 (1995)

"Rats Live On No Evil Star" *White of the Moon,* 1999 (1997)

"Postcards from the King of Tides" *Candles for Elizabeth,* 1998 (1997)

"Salmagundi (New York City, 1981)" *Carpe Noctem,* 1998 (1998)

"Zelda Fitzgerald in Ballet Attire" *Tales of Pain and Wonder,* 2000 (1995-1999)

"Spindleshanks (News Orleans, 1956) *Queer Fear,* 2000 (2000)

“The Road of Pins” *Dark Terrors 6*, 2002 (2001)

“Onion” *Wrongs Things*, 2001 (2001)

“Les Fleurs Empoisonnées” Subterranean Press 2001 (2001)

“Night Story (1973)” *Wrong Things*, 2001 (2001)

“From Cabinet 34, Drawer 6” *Weird Shadows Over Innsmouth*, 2005 (2002)

“Andromeda Among the Stones” *Embrace the Mutation*, 2003 (2002)

“La Peau Verte” *To Charles Fort, With Love*, 2005 (2003)

“Riding the White Bull” *Argosy* #1, 2004 (2003)

“Waycross” Subterranean Press, 2004 (2003)

“The Dead and the Moonstruck” *Gothic! Ten Original Dark Tales*, 2004 (2004)

“Daughter of the Four of Pentacles” *Thrillers II*, 2007 (2004)

The Dry Salvages Subterranean Press, 2004 (2004)

“The Worm in My Mind’s Eye” Subterranean Press (chapbook, 2004)

“Houses Under the Sea” *Thrillers II*, 2007 (2004)

The author wishes to note that the text for each of these stories, as it appears in this collection, will differ, often significantly, from the originally published texts. In some cases, stories were revised for each reprinting (and some have been reprinted numerous times). No story is ever finished. There’s only the moment when I force myself to stop and provisionally type THE END.

To Be Continued in *Volume 2…*
(Coming in 2014)

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About the Author

She wrote this book.

About the Font

This book was set in Garamond, a typeface named after the French punch-cutter Claude Garamond (c. 1480 – 1561). Garamond has been chosen here for its ability to convey a sense of fluidity and consistency. It has been chosen by the author because this typeface is among the most legible and readable old-style serif print typefaces. In terms of ink usage, Garamond is also considered to be one of the most eco-friendly major fonts.

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